

**STATUS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN ONLINE NEWS MEDIA:
A CASE STUDY OF NEPAL**

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Abstract

Scholars contend that media accountability to the public and professional stakeholders has been improving in recent years because of the increased use of digital platforms. Since most studies related to online news media accountability have focused on developed countries, this research study examines the state of accountability in online news media in Nepal, where access to online media is very limited and audiences are barely aware of media's journalistic responsibilities. By employing case study research method with three data sources, this research study assesses the state of online media accountability in Nepal, key challenges for ensuring accountability in journalism created using digital platforms, and the role of audiences in making online news media accountable. The study finds that Internet accessibility, media literacy, and availability of resources are the primary challenges to making media accountable in Nepal. The study concludes by offering recommendations for future research and practical applications.

Keywords: Online media, ethics, accountability, semi-structured interview, document review, audience

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On June 20, 2013, three online journalists in Nepal —Sushil Pant, Santosh Bhattarai and Puskar Kandel— were arrested against a complaint lodged for publishing a news report on *nepaliheadlines.com* about a girls' college in Kathmandu (Ekantipur, 2013a). The article allegedly tarnished the image of the campus and the character of its students. Alleging breach of the Electronic Transaction Act 2008, the journalists were also treated as cyber criminals just because Nepal lacks a legislation that can regulate online media. There was a huge outcry at national and international levels to release these journalists on the ground of press freedom and right to freedom of expression ensured by the Interim Constitution of Nepal-2007 (Dhungana, 2013; Ekantipur, 2013a). As a consequence, the journalists were released after five days. However, this incident has initiated an extensive public discussion in Nepal on the accountability of journalists and news media to their professional and public stakeholders on digital platforms.

The birth of the Internet and the growth of online news media have attracted the attention of scholars worldwide to the issue of accountability on digital platforms. Regarding the practice of journalism on these new platforms, media scholars have been generally optimistic, emphasizing the substantial strengths of the Internet in terms of maintaining media accountability (Deuze & Yeshua, 2001; Fengler, 2012; Friend & Singer, 2007; Heikkila et al., 2012; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Krogh, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; Plaisance, 2000; Singer, 2005; Ward, 2010b). For instance, the Internet offers affordable new venues (such as blogs, micro-blogs, and discussion forums) for public discourse on journalistic performance with regard to social responsibility. Audiences, largely ignored by traditional media in the past, today, have their own digital platforms for expressing their concerns. In addition, audiences can take part in news production as contributors as well as gatekeepers. Therefore, the

aforementioned scholars argue that news media tend to be more accountable to professional and public stakeholders on digital platforms owing to constant monitoring by global audiences.

Though online media have been around for over two decades, they are still a new phenomenon among journalistic professionals worldwide due to rapid technological change and development, as all forms of mass media converge onto multimedia platforms. Even though these digital platforms have many features (such as universal accessibility, interactivity, and public participation) that can be useful for upholding public accountability, they are not free from professional challenges such as gatekeeping issues, hasty information updates, and post-publication content moderation (Babcock, 2012; Friend & Singer, 2007; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Such challenges may call journalistic performance into question with regard to upholding and maintaining accountability to public and professional stakeholders on digital platforms.

Accountability to these two stakeholders (public and professional) is one of the most widely discussed ethical standards in print and online journalism. Many journalism institutions including the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ, 1996), the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ, 2011), the American Society of News Editors (ASNE, 1975), the International Federation of Journalists, (IFJ, 1986), the Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ, 1997), and Press Council Nepal (PCN, 2008) have recognized accountability as one of the fundamental standards of professional journalism. Accordingly, in recent years there have been many studies of online news media accountability, focused primarily on developed countries in North America and Europe. These studies conclude that, in these countries, media accountability to public and professional stakeholders tends to increase on digital platforms (Groenhart, 2012; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Joseph, 2011; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; Singer, 2005), but these studies also

acknowledge that the practice of media accountability varies based on newsroom cultures, infrastructural requirements, and a range of external forces (Joseph, 2010; Groenhart, 2012; Heikkilä et al., 2012). Basic factors such as access to the Internet, media literacy, opportunities for interactivity, and knowledge of media ethics can significantly impact media accountability, since audiences armed with these instruments can use them to reinforce journalistic norms (Fengler, Eberwein, & Leppik-Bork, 2011; Groenhart, 2012; Joseph, 2011).

While these studies present a solid account of online media accountability in developed countries, they largely fail to account for some of the major accountability challenges faced by developing countries such as Nepal. Nepal can be a typical example because it is a country where three-fourths of the population do not have access to the Internet and, as a consequence, audiences are unable to participate in online activities that would empower them to ensure media accountability online through constant monitoring and interactivity. Nonetheless, hundreds of online news portals are in regular operation. According to the annual reports of Press Council Nepal (PCN) from the last five years (2010-2014), there have been a significant number of complaints from the general public regarding violations of professional standards and codes of ethics by Nepali journalists and news media, leading to breaches of public accountability. The number of these complaints that focus on unprofessional performance by online news media has been increasing every year.

Generally speaking, Nepal's media scenario is robust, including nearly eight hundred newspapers, four hundred radio stations, three dozen television channels, more than three hundred online news portals in regular operation, and more than eight thousand people involved in the journalism profession (Ekantipur, 2013b; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). In

addition, PCN is mandated to develop as well as update professional standards and codes of ethics for Nepali journalists, in consultation with the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), to make sure news media in Nepal are responsible to society (IFAMMN, 2012; IMMN, 2008; Media Foundation, 2012; Press Council Act, 1992).

However, as this study demonstrates, many journalists and members of the general public in Nepal have come to recognize that having unique technological features (such as interactivity, accessibility, and a multimedia format) on digital platforms is not a sufficient guarantee of public accountability, and that professional self-regulation by journalists and close scrutiny by the public are equally essential. Unfortunately, audiences, journalists, and media institutions in Nepal suffer from both technological and professional accountability challenges due to a low level of access to computers and the Internet (the digital divide) and a low level of media literacy, which prevents the public from properly scrutinizing the accountability practices of online media. Media scholars and institutions in Nepal (e.g. Acharya, 2005; IMMN, 2008; KC, 2009; Kshetry, 2008; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013) note that various unprofessional practices are more dominant in online news portals than in traditional media; such practices include unhealthy competition for news breaks, sensational news presentation, use of secondary sources, the rarity of error correction, and avoidance of critical comments and opinions. This situation is opposite to that which is described by Western media scholars, who advocate digital platforms as a tool for upholding media accountability. Criticizing present-day trends of online media in Nepal, a senior news editor of *nepalnews.com* suggested that "online journalism platforms, in general, are used for generating revenue through multiple clicks (such as Google ads), and the operators do not bother with journalism ethics and principles" (K.K. Poudel, personal communication. December 31, 2012).

Given this context, it is important to identify how online journalists in Nepal are maintaining professional and public accountability. This research study can be an important step toward assessing the sources of motivation to maintain accountability in online news media among journalists in Nepal. In a country where there is not a single law that recognizes online media, nor is there a mechanism mandated to monitor online news portals (IFAMMN, 2012; Media Foundation, 2012), nor is there a code of ethics for Nepali journalists directly addressing online media behaviour with regard to public or professional accountability, journalists' professional self-regulation is under scrutiny. Research into media accountability of online platforms in Nepal is therefore necessary. This research hopes to assist in providing insight into this issue by answering the following questions:

1. What is the state of online journalism in Nepal with regard to accountability?
 - a) What are the key challenges for ensuring accountability in journalism created using digital platforms?
 - b) What role do audiences play in ensuring online news media accountability?

Qualitative research has been employed in this study, as it allows the researcher to understand with “more depth and sensitivity people’s subjective understandings while acting in their social situations” (Nardi, 2007, p. 36). As part of its case study research design, this research includes a documentation review of twenty-five news stories published in the five most-viewed online news portals in Nepal, archival records of five news stories (one from each news portal), and semi-structured interviews with ten journalists affiliated with the selected news portals. Content of the twenty-five news stories was analyzed from the perspective of media accountability in order to assess the on-the-ground reality of news portals with regard to public accountability. Furthermore, archival records of five news stories were analyzed to assess the

consistency with the twenty-five news stories in upholding accountability on digital platforms. Finally, key themes were derived from the interview findings and analyzed according to the research questions using case study research methods.

Operating from the assumption that online news media are likely to be less accountable owing to the digital divide, a lack of legal recognition of online media, the absence of an online-specific code of ethics, and a lack of adequate investment and infrastructure, this study investigates the status of accountability to public and professional stakeholders of online news media in Nepal. It examines the accountability practices of the five top-viewed Nepali online news portals to identify present day trends in the exercise of professional standards with regard to media accountability to the four major categories of stakeholders, namely political, market, public and professional stakeholders.

This thesis finds that traditional news media and online news portals associated with them are considered more accountable to public and professional stakeholders than online-only news portals. It is also found that the market stakeholder is considered the dominant stakeholder to manipulate media content. Similarly, media monitoring bodies such as press council and/or ombudsman are found relevant in the digital age owing to the magnitude of the digital divide which limits the interactivity of audience on digital platforms, and, therefore, resulting in news media that are found to be less accountable to their professional and public stakeholders.

This research study also identifies the key challenges for ensuring accountability in journalism created using a digital platform. It demonstrates that Nepal, a country where only one-fourth of the population has even basic access to the internet, is an illuminating case study for the distinct accountability challenges facing online news portals in developing countries, and

explores some of the factors required to empower audiences, journalists, and media institutions themselves to make digital media accountable – factors such as the knowledge and skills to use the new media facilities responsibly, quality of connection and affordability of service, legal recognition of online media, the economic sustainability of online news portals, and codes of ethics regarding the technicalities of online media. The practical application of accountability instruments (such as responding to audience comments and concerns; linking to sources available on the Internet and maintaining source transparency; not deleting posts once published; properly acknowledging content moderation; and maintaining a digital archive of online media) is generally very poor in online media in Nepal (Acharya, 2005; IFAMMN, 2012; IMMN, 2008; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). Bringing light to such challenges in developing countries such as Nepal is important, as they have not been given adequate scholarly attention.

In illuminating and examining the range of challenges to online media accountability in Nepal, this study also puts a special focus on the role of audiences. Media scholars (e.g., Friend & Singer, 2007; Joseph, 2011; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; Singer, 2005; Ward & Wasserman, 2012) observe that public participation and interactivity are important factors in making online media and journalists accountable to public and professional stakeholders. Webb (2009) and Solzhenitsyn (1978) further argue that media must be responsible to their audiences in the same way a democratic government is responsible to the parliament. Ideally, audiences can watch the watchdogs for their professional performance and can bring media and journalists to account for the quality of their performance (Krogh, 2012; Heikkilä, 2012; Ward & Wasserman, 2012). Yet media audiences in Nepal are seldom consulted in the development of journalistic codes of ethics, or in the setting of professional standards for media and journalism (Acharya, 2005; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013).

In brief, various studies (e.g. Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Fengler, 2012; Friend & Singer, 2007; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Joseph, 2011; Krogh, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; McQuail, 2003; Singer, 2005) conducted on media accountability in Europe and North America show that digital platforms can enhance the practice of media accountability to the public. This research study assesses the status of online media in Nepal, a developing country with a significant digital divide, since media accountability to public and professional stakeholders on digital platforms in the context of developing countries has not been adequately studied. This study also identifies some key challenges to public and professional accountability in Nepali online media, and finally, examines the role of audiences in ensuring online news media accountability to public and professional stakeholders.

This thesis comprises six chapters: (1) Introduction, (2) Literature Review, (3) Research Design and Methodology, (4) Findings, (5) Analysis, and (6) Conclusion. The introduction comprises an overview of the subject matter and its background, emphasizing the importance of the research study. This chapter also includes research questions, a brief overview of methodology and thesis structure. The next chapter, the literature review, examines accountability practices in news media, with a particular focus on online news portals and whether or not accountability practices have been enhanced on digital platforms. This chapter includes a discussion of the concept of media accountability, its scope, its evolution, the challenges it faces on digital platforms, the role of audiences, and the importance of media accountability mechanisms. Research areas that lack sufficient study are examined, and the four frames of media accountability proposed by various scholars (such as Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004, Krogh, 2012, McQuail, 2003, 2005) are used as a theoretical framework.

Chapter three, methodology, then covers the research design and strategy, data collection and analysis, and ethical issues. This chapter describes the case study research design, consisting of multiple data collection methods and content analysis. For example, research data were collected through documentation of twenty-five news stories, semi-structured interviews with ten online journalists, and archival records of five news stories. These three methods were used to form a data triangulation in order to avoid biases linked to a particular data collection method. Chapter four, includes a full description of the findings collected through these three different methods according to key themes. Chapter five analyses the findings of the research in order to assess the state of accountability in online news media in Nepal. Finally, the conclusion begins with a brief overview of the thesis, including a description of the significant findings of the thesis. It concludes with recommendations for future academic research and professional applications.

The following section will present an overview of various scholarly articles and books on media accountability with an emphasis on digital platforms.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this chapter is to review the existing scholarly literature on media and journalism with regard to media accountability on digital platforms. The chapter is divided into eight sections. The first four sections review and analyze various scholarly articles and books on media accountability in order to assess the status of accountability in online news media. The next three sections illustrate the new accountability challenges created by digital media, the role of audiences in online media accountability, and the need for accountability mechanisms for online news portals. Finally, the last section provides a theoretical framework to analyze the idea of media accountability to various stakeholders.

The first section investigates the concept of accountability in the media sphere. The second section analyzes the terms "responsibility" and "accountability", which are often used interchangeably. Next, the third section discusses the evolution of the concept of accountability and the paradigm shift from a libertarian free press system to a socially responsible press system. Scholars believe that, owing to unique features such as transparency, interactivity and immediacy, online media can enhance accountability to public and professional stakeholders. Following up on this idea, in the fourth section various scholarly articles are reviewed in order to assess accountability practices on digital platforms.

Online media have not only introduced new features that can aid accountability to the public, but have also created new challenges for accountability. Therefore, the fifth section of the chapter deals with new kinds of challenges (such as speedy updates, post-publication correction, post deletion, and increased plagiarism) created by digital media. Section six explores the role of the audience as citizen journalists, who are actively participating on digital platforms through

various new media tools (such as blogs, social media, and discussion forums) to make online media accountable to public and professional stakeholders.

However, mass audiences are not an organized entity capable of systematically monitoring or enforcing media accountability. Thus, the seventh section of the chapter deals with various media accountability mechanisms through which audiences, in addition to other stakeholders, can have a meaningful and effective role in monitoring online media professionalism and ensuring accountability to public and professional stakeholders. The last section presents a theoretical framework, which is an important tool to interpret the findings of the research. The chapter then concludes by highlighting the issues related to public and professional accountability that this study goes on to investigate.

2.1 Media Accountability: Concept and Scope

Media accountability is a kind of social control of media content, responding to media's perceived obligations to society such as providing quality information, supporting democratic systems of governance, respecting human rights, and avoiding/minimizing harm to society (McQuail, 2005), and to a common belief that media outlets should be held accountable to public and professional stakeholders for the quality of their performance (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Fengler, Eberwein & Leppik-Bork, 2011; McQuail, 2005; Porlezza, 2012).

Defining the concept of media accountability, McQuail (2005) writes that it incorporates "all the voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication" (p.207). Different media scholars have defined the concept of media accountability in their own ways, but all have

explained that it involves the performance of the professional/moral obligations of news media. For Plaisance (2000), media accountability refers to the "manifestation of claims to responsibility" (p.258); for McIntyre (1987), it is an "umbrella term for all of the ways for enforcing the moral obligations" that a media outlet needs to fulfill (p. 151); for Painter and Hodges (2012), it is "a process by which media could or should be expected or obliged to report a truthful and complex account of the news to their constituents" (p.4); and for Glasser (2009), it refers to "the willingness of the media to answer for what they do by their acts of publication, including what they do to society at large, and [...] the feasibility of securing accountability where there is unwillingness" (p.132). Several scholars (Friend & Singer, 2007; McQuail, 2003; Painter & Hodges, 2012; Plaisance, 2000) agree that accountability plays a critical role in the overall functioning of the news media. McQuail (2005) notes that a media accountability process should meet three general criteria: a) respecting the right to free publication, b) preventing or limiting harm to individuals or society caused by publication, and c) promoting positive aspects of publication.

The SPJ (1996) has developed benchmarks of accountability for professional journalists. According to the SPJ, journalists should "encourage the public to express its grievances against the news media, admit mistakes and correct them promptly, expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media, and abide by the same high standards to which they hold others." In addition, scholars (Friend & Singer, 2007; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Singer, 2003) affirm that journalistic accountability can be ensured by a range of practices, including the publication of letters to the editor, accessibility to concerned audience members, the archiving of past news stories for future reference, and sincere efforts to inform the public about news corrections. In addition, Painter and Hodges (2012) propose various ways of making media

accountable to the public in a democratic society, such as developing and implementing codes of ethics, developing autonomous press councils or ombudsmen, fostering media criticism through free and independent op-ed pages, and encouraging citizen journalism initiatives.

This section has presented a synopsis of the concept of the term "accountability" in the context of news media on digital platforms. It is noted that many scholars and professional media institutions have prioritized accountability as a significant aspect of maintaining media professionalism. In the following section, a brief analysis of the difference between responsibility and accountability is discussed, as these terms are often used synonymously, and as identifying a precise meaning for accountability is important to this study.

2.2 Responsibility vs. Accountability

The terms *responsibility* and *accountability* are often used interchangeably, but they are different in their essence. Responsibility is a duty to discharge functional and moral obligations, whereas accountability is the readiness to give an explanation or justification for one's acts, judgment or intentions to concerned stakeholders (McQuail, 2005). In other words, responsibility is something that journalists take on themselves, but accountability is what others require of journalists. Whereas responsibility defines proper conduct, accountability compels one to apply it in practice.

According to McQuail (1997), responsibility refers to "those obligations which are attributed to the media that they should respond to public expectations related to social needs"; however, accountability, for McQuail, refers to "the process in which media are called to account for meeting their obligations" (p.515). Hodges (1986) notes that:

[T]he issue of *responsibility* is the following: to what social needs should we expect journalists to respond? The issue of accountability is as follows: how might society call on journalists to account for their performance of the responsibility given them. Responsibility has to do with defining proper conduct, accountability with compelling it. (p.14, as cited in McQuail, 1997, p. 515)

One key dimension of responsibility, McQuail (1997) argues, is the degree of compulsion involved. He writes that responsibility ranges on a scale from the "completely voluntary" (journalists follow codes of conduct simply because they are committed to maintaining professional standards) to the "completely compulsory" (journalists or organizations are legally punished for non-compliance with codes of conduct) (p.515). Different media scholars have categorized media obligations differently, with variation in the degrees of obligation or compulsion. Blizek (1971) divides media accountability into three categories based on three types of responsibility: legal, moral and social. In the first category, a state agency or mechanism handles the issues at hand; in the second category, an individual journalist is responsible for following a code of ethics; and in the last category, journalists or media institutions are responsible for the consequences in society that result from their news. Hodges (1986) divides responsibility into four categories: assigned responsibility (this refers to those issues covered by law and regulations), contracted obligations (these refer to duties maintained by convention and mutual agreement), self-imposed obligations (these refer to professional commitments to serve the public), and the responsibility to deny (refers to rejecting public demands that are contrary to media ethics and professionalism) (p.516). In contrast, Christians (1989) distinguishes three "types of accountability": legal liability, moral sanctions and answerability (pp. 40-41). The first type relates to conditions where legal obligations exist; under such conditions, the court decides who is liable and the government imposes penalties if the legal obligations are unfulfilled. Moral sanction, the second type of accountability described by Christians, is based on a professional

journalist's moral responsibility for his/her morally questionable activities or for violations of the code of ethics; moral sanction involves criticism among the journalist's circle of peers and within the media institution. Answerability, Christians' third mode of accountability, describes a circumstance in which a journalist or media institution is questioned by the public for their professional performance, and in which the institution is accountable for responding to those questions through dialogue and interaction.

Maintaining conceptual clarity between "responsibility" and "accountability" is very important to this study. This section has analyzed academic interpretations of the two terms (which are often used interchangeably), in order to distinguish them from each other. Drawing on the opinions of these four scholars (Blizek, 1971; Christians, 1989; Hodges, 1986, and McQuail, 1997, 2003, 2005), we come to know that accountability can be categorized into at least three distinct types: legal, moral, and social. However, Hodges (1986) uses different terms to denote these types (such as, assigned responsibility, self-chosen obligations, and contracted obligations), and his idea of deny responsibility is not discussed by other scholars. This discussion shows that responsibility is a conceptual understanding, whereas accountability is to implement that understanding into journalistic practice, and also accountability can be measured from a compulsory to voluntary scale. The following section discusses the tension between the free press and the responsible press, and presents a short account of accountability — how it evolved in the past, and how it is interpreted today.

2.3 Evolution of Media Accountability

Industrialization, technological innovations, democratization and increased literacy in the 19th century contributed to an expansion of mass newspapers in the Western world. Media outlets

were considered defenders of democracy and information trustees with "a moral claim to autonomy and non-interference by government" (Christians et al. 2009, p.55). However, the growing size of media outlets, particularly in Europe and the US, was often characterized by market monopoly, low-quality journalism, and various negative consequences of unbridled media power (Christians et al., 2009; Krogh, 2012). Near the end of the 19th century, the yellow journalism scandal in the US stunned the entire journalism profession, increasing concerns about ethical standards and professional practices among journalists. In response, voices began to emerge regarding the media's responsibility to serve the public interest (Krogh, 2012).

The first journalistic code of ethics was drafted and adopted in Kansas, a US state, by the Kansas Editorial Association in 1910. Following this trend, journalists and media institutions in other American states including Missouri, South Dakota, Oregon, and Washington also gradually began to draft and endorse state-wide codes (Christians, 1989). The most famous and widely applied code of ethics of that time was the Canons of Journalism, prepared and endorsed by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) in 1922. The Canons were followed as a standard of journalistic ethics by many other journalism institutions, including the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). During the late 1920s, a fierce debate arose among media professionals in regard to the enforcement provisions of the codes – without which, some said, the whole enterprise would be a "mockery". At the same time, an opposing perspective was gaining momentum, focused on the idea that enforceable measures could create censorship that may "violate the free press doctrine" (Christians, 1989, p.37). This debate had two significant consequences: first, no further media ethics codes were developed for almost five decades; second, the existing codes were used as showy tusks lacking any real professional obligations (Christians, 1989). In the meantime, government functionaries were gradually becoming active

in curbing the unbridled freedom of mass media on the grounds of public interest. Amid such tensions between free media advocates and responsible media proponents, the Hutchins Commission submitted a report in 1947 entitled *A Free and Responsible Press*, which created a paradigm shift for journalism ethics, away from the libertarian concept of press freedom and toward communitarianism (Merrill, 1997). Later, in 1956, the concepts of social responsibility and public accountability were theorized by three scholars of the University of Illinois in a seminal work entitled *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do*¹.

In 1973, after two and half decades, the SPJ revised its codes of ethics, clearly incorporating the term "accountability" and stating that "journalists should be accountable to the public for their reports and the public should be encouraged to voice its grievances against the media. Open dialogue with our readers, viewers, and listeners should be fostered" (SPJ, 1973, Art.V(5)). In 1988, a public forum on "Media Freedom and Accountability" was organized at Columbia University in New York "to examine the problems of media freedom and accountability" (Dennis et al., 1989, p. viii). Several other similar public discussions have been organized in different parts of the world in the past two decades, and many scholars (Babcock, 2012; Christians et al., 2009; Dennis et al., 1989; McQuail, 2003; Pritchard, 2000) have written books and research articles on media freedom and accountability. Such meetings and works of research have firmly established the notion of media accountability internationally.

¹ Both the Hutchins Commission Report and the book *Four Theories of the Press* were severely criticized during their early decades for expressing cold war sentiments and for not including empirical outcomes, and due to fears that the press could lose some of its privileges. However, American as well as international media began to shift gradually towards the norms of social responsibility and accountability as benchmarks of professionalism and self-regulation (Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 2003).

Social responsibility theory is a product of ethical concepts that encourage journalists to agree on a common ethics for the purposes of social betterment and accountability to their audiences. Similarly, *Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1003* (Council of Europe, 1993) on the ethics of journalism states that "media have an ethical responsibility towards citizens and society" (article 1), that news media must correct information immediately and routinely if errors are identified (article 26), and that audiences possess the right to reply and news media have the responsibility to respond to them (article 27).

After years of research and discussions with many professionals and scholars, the Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ, 1997) developed nine guiding principles of journalism that are simultaneously professional and ethical. The second principle, "journalism's first loyalty is to citizens," integrates media accountability, with the term "citizens" indicating media audiences of all types. The Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ, 2011) has developed guidelines for ethical journalism that describe the accountability of news media comprehensively. The guidelines express commitments to fairness and reliability of reporting and to prioritizing service to the public interest. They clearly distinguish between news and opinions, discourage reporting in disguise, and prohibit image altering and the deviation of visuals, which can distort context. The guidelines encourage the prompt, transparent correction of errors, the acquisition of permission whenever possible in reporting, and the maintenance of digital archives with full content.

Similarly, the Code of Journalistic Ethics-2003 (amended and revised- 2008) developed by Press Council Nepal (PCN, 2008) describes media accountability relating to the professional and public stakeholders. Among the key accountability issues included in article 3 of the code are: imparting true, factual and balanced information, taking responsibility for media content,

respecting the right to privacy, maintaining a high degree of professionalism by following basic norms of journalism, correcting errors immediately, and promoting social welfare (PCN, 2008). In addition, 14 provisions listed in article 4 of the code also make journalists aware of ways to remain responsible to the professional and the public stakeholders of accountability. The key issues included in article 4 are: maintaining professional relations with news sources and preserving confidentiality, not presenting advertisements as news, not distorting facts, and not spreading hatred, fear or provocation (PCN, 2008).

In summary, this section has presented a brief description of the evolution of the concept of media accountability and the tension between the free press and responsible press. The concept of a responsible (as well as accountable) press was made popular by the 1947 Hutchins Commission report entitled "A Free and Responsible Press." From this point onward, the libertarian free press concept has gradually given way to a socially responsible press concept. Steadily, the responsible press message has spread from North America to Europe and beyond, and codes of ethics have been formulated accordingly, in order to foster professional and accountable practices. Scholars (e.g., Friend & Singer, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; Singer, 2010) believe that the Internet has facilitated the growth of the media accountability concept, and that online media are able to practice accountability more fully than traditional media outlets. Pursuing these ideas, the next section describes accountability practices on digital platforms.

2.4 Media Accountability on Digital Platforms

Friend and Singer (2007) argue that, as a newly developed genre, online journalism currently lacks ethical guidelines adequate for addressing the challenges created by digital platforms. Meanwhile, the application of traditional ethical practices to online journalism has

been shown to be debatable, as some journalists argue that the Internet is a fundamentally different medium (Ward, 2010a & 2010b; Ward & Wasserman, 2012), while others argue that journalism transcends technological barriers and that the same standards are ubiquitous regardless of the medium (Joseph, 2011; Reuters, 2013; Singer, 2003). In response to the question of whether journalistic ethics change in the context of online journalism, many scholars and professional institutions have said "No." The ethical guidelines of the CAJ (2011) clearly indicate that "ethical practice does not change with the medium." Reuters (2013) explicitly states that "Internet reporting is nothing more than applying the principles of sound journalism to the sometimes unusual situations thrown up in the virtual world. The same standards of sourcing, identification and verification apply." For Hohman (2011) and Whitehouse (2010), traditional ethics rules prevail in online journalism. Kovach & Rosentiel (2001) have expressed similar thoughts, stating that "journalism's function is not fundamentally changed by the digital age. The techniques may be different, but the underlying principles are the same" (p. 26).

New digital technologies enabled by the Internet may significantly enhance the range of attempts to foster public accountability through online interaction with users, argue some scholars. Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) find that Internet-based media platforms (websites, weblogs, social media networks, etc.) are more favorable to public accountability than traditional media formats, and that this trend has increased over time. The two-way interactivity of online platforms has changed the role of journalists from that of a lecturer role to that of a forum leader, argue Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007). In various studies (Singer, 2005; Lasorsa, Lewis & Hilton, 2012; Porlezza, 2012), scholars have reached the conclusion that online journalism has fostered accountability and transparency more easily than its traditional counterparts.

In a seminal research study, Jane Singer (2005) examines the blog platform as adopted by political journalists in traditional mainstream media, and finds that journalists who blog usually challenge the "professional norms" that frame journalists as "non-partisan gatekeeper[s] of information important to the public," but that blogging journalists are nonetheless more "transparent and accountable" than journalists in traditional media, including radio, television and newspapers, as blogs are a highly interactive and participatory format (p.147). According to Singer, though the blog confronts traditional journalistic roles such as "gatekeeping" and "non-

partisanship", the format at the same time has encouraged journalist bloggers to uphold accountability and transparency by using hyperlinks to sources and related materials.

An empirical study on micro-blogging by Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2012), built upon Singer's (2005) normalizing hypothesis, examines how mainstream journalists who micro-blog (this format boomed with the rise of Twitter) negotiate their professional norms and practices in a new media format. Like Singer's (2005) study, their study finds that journalists behave more transparently and accountably in new media forms by responding to reader queries, participating in issue-related discussions, providing further information, and linking to internal and external websites. They write that "although the process of referencing original source material has not always been easily facilitated in traditional media formats [...] the hyperlinks that are endemic to blogging and micro-blogging present an opportunity for journalists to be more transparent, and thus more accountable" to the public (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012, p.24). Similarly, their study also finds that "big" media journalists, termed "elite-journalists" by the authors, participate less in discussion, rarely reply to audience questions, and usually do not provide external links. Their official websites are generally less accountable and transparent to general audiences than those of their counterparts in smaller media outlets.

Despite these positive developments in accountability on online media platforms, certain features of digital platforms, such as speedy updates, the lack of deadlines, the absence of space/time limits, and the participation of citizen journalists in news content, have added their own challenges. For instance, many online media organizations archive content selectively, while some do not keep online archives at all. This trend has encouraged online media to compromise on issues of accountability and transparency (Friend & Singer, 2007; Giannakouloupoulos, Varlamis & Kouloglou, 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Similarly, limitations on staff in newsrooms, and their responsibility to perform multiple roles from reporter to editor, publisher, and promoter, have also weakened journalistic accountability (Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

Scholars (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Friend & Singer, 2007; Singer, 2003; Ward, 2010b) argue that traditional principles of journalism such as accuracy, balance, credibility, information verification, gatekeeping and accountability have been challenged on digital platforms in a number of ways.

Gatekeeping function is vanishing. Gatekeeping is a process through which information is filtered for dissemination by means of a variety of news media outlets in accordance to a set of criteria determined by a number of factors (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Gatekeeping occurs at all levels of the media structure—from a reporter deciding which sources are chosen to include in a story to editors deciding which stories are covered.

The journalism gatekeeping mechanism is for internal quality control and the upholding of professional practices. In traditional media, editors and subeditors read, edit, re-write and verify information to ensure that its quality meets the media outlet's standards before it is published. However, the evolution of technologies and social norms has made it difficult to define online journalism in traditional ways (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). On the one hand, the role of online-only journalists consists largely of "information-gathering [... or] compiling stories originally written for someone else" (Singer, 2003, p.149); on the other hand, newsgathering and publishing systems are easily available to the public. Therefore, the gatekeeping function is gradually losing its significance.

Many scholars agree that information verification is a challenging job in an online context (Friend & Singer, 2007; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Singer, 2003; Ward, 2010b). New media technology and the growing trend toward the production of speedy information (including the "24/7" news culture) have weakened long-developed information verification practices. Online information verification has to be very fast, and there is intense competition to break stories immediately, much more than to get the stories right through careful scrutiny. Singer (2003) writes:

An emphasis on speed blends with an emphasis on novelty – old news is no news – [This will result] in a de-emphasis on fact-checking and a decline in trustworthiness. In this view, [the] ability to enhance a professional public service

role through new media is undermined by practitioners' inability or unwillingness to carry out this role. (p.153)

In such situation, journalists treat facts as a "commodity" that is easily retrieved, redesigned and targeted to a specific audience, and they spend more time trying to find new information "to add to the existing news, usually interpretation, rather than trying to independently discover and verify news facts" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 86). Journalists seek particular information relevant to their stories from Internet sources, immediately synthesizing this information into their existing news stories, or else using this information to twist the story into new angles and disseminate the new angles as updated information. This trend, resulting from new information technologies, has made journalists passive information receivers rather than active gatherers.

Lack of professional knowledge. The majority of online media employees come from diverse backgrounds outside of the journalism profession and even for those trained in journalism, academic curricula specific to online journalism are quite rare in higher education (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Friend & Singer, 2007; Singer, 2003). Therefore, few students are familiar with online tools from an academic perspective before they enter the profession, regardless of whether they study journalism. Therefore, employees in the digital realm are likely to be ill-equipped, either journalistically or technically. According to Friend and Singer (2007), online employees generally fall into the former category: they are not well trained in re-writing, editing and updating websites, or in information search strategies or the creation of multimedia products. Instead of journalistic knowledge and skills, they have technical knowledge and organizational skills.

Singer (2003) argues that many online journalists, in order to elude commercial pressures, blur the boundary between news and advertisements by writing advertorials or adding pop-up

advertising windows that readers face when looking for other information. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) express their worries regarding the watchdog function of journalism, which they say has been seriously threatened by a new kind of corporate conglomeration. Their research findings indicate that digital platforms are widely used to "distort, mislead, and overwhelm the function of a free press" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; p.166), and that new technologies have contributed to superficial reporting that relies merely on chat box gossip (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

Crowdsourcing and content moderation. The Internet is a popular platform for online journalists not only to promote their stories but also to collect information through various social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Media institutions and journalists use crowdsourcing to collect information at their ease without spending much money or time in the field. The main attraction of crowdsourcing so far is the high proportion of audience members who are ready to contribute information at any time, regardless of proper acknowledgment. Authenticity of information gathered through mass intelligence is under question because nobody takes responsibility for authenticating or verifying the collected information. In addition, privacy is frequently violated online through the use of information originally posted on audience members' Facebook or Twitter pages without verification or consent. Whitehouse (2010) contends that privacy should not be invaded even though crowdsourcing tools are easily available and there is no existing legal sanction against such practices.

Content moderation has been widely practiced in traditional media outlets to ensure quality by maintaining professional norms such as truth seeking, harm minimization, independence and accountability (SPJ, 1996). The SPJ Code of Ethics, furthermore, encourages media organizations and journalists to admit mistakes and correct them promptly during the

journalistic process, and to invite readers to discuss their grievances about journalists' conduct.

Cenite and Zhang (2012) opine that the same editorial standards should apply in their entirety for feedback content moderation, since "light or absent moderation has a price" (p.43).

Feedback receiving practice: Online news media invite audience members to comment on stories since unlimited space is available on the web, and the growing involvement of the audience is a success indicator for digital platforms. Many audience members, signing in with pseudonyms, react with obscene language, abuse, and speculative content, which is published without, or with very little, moderation. However, the same media may have a different policy for receiving feedback in its traditional media outlets, particularly in newspapers, and may reject feedback submitted under pseudonyms, or which fail standards of language quality and content worthiness. Hlavach and Freivogel (2012) argue that an open invitation to comment on online stories can "attract gossip and speculation," and permission to remain anonymous may give rise to defamatory content (p.99). Most journalistic ethical codes (e.g., SPJ, 1996; CAJ, 2011; PCN, 2008) clearly state that news sources should be fully identified when possible; failing this, reasons for anonymity should be explained clearly in the story.

Post deletion or "unpublishing". Traditional news media are increasingly adopting online editions, which have advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, online content can allow readers to recall past events and make them immediately available. Increasingly, our lives are documented and published online, and this information remains 'just a click away' in perpetuity. Many media organizations have been facing grievances from those requesting to have online content removed for various reasons including the publication of incorrect or incomplete information, misleading or outdated content, source remorse, or even false allegations (CAJ, 2010; English, Currie & Link, 2010). Many people also ask Google to "unpublish" information

that affects their professional lives, but Google cannot automatically remove anything unless information is removed from the source site (Moskwa, 2009). Recognizing the growing concerns of the public in this regard, many online news organizations have started to develop internal policies for deleting or moderating defamatory comments that readers have posted about an article, though removing entire articles is unlikely due to the lack of clear policies in this regard (CAJ, 2010; English, 2009). Even though online archiving systems may continuously victimize people (for instance, when a years-old, unproved allegation continues to circulate on the Internet, creating a biased perception of the accused), there is a serious ethical dilemma regarding whether or not it is fair to remove a story from online archives, or whether it should be left intact. Is rewriting history in this way a good thing? If yes, how and on what grounds? How should online media respond to unpublishing requests while upholding journalistic principles and best practices? In this respect, digital platforms have created a serious ethical dilemma in journalism.

This section has identified strengths and opportunities on digital platforms with regard to ensuring and enhancing journalistic accountability with regard to public and professional stakeholders. Scholars (e.g., Friend and Singer, 2007; Joseph, 2011; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012) believe that accountability practices on digital platforms have developed beyond those in traditional media outlets due to the former's unique features, such as interactivity, transparency, accessibility and immediacy. However, digital platforms have also created new challenges for the maintenance of journalistic values and the upholding of accountability practices, including unhealthy competition for quick information updates, post-publication corrections and verifications, the absence of an effective gatekeeping mechanism, deletion of published posts as a means of safeguarding the interests of journalists and media owners, the practice of journalism by technical people without suitable professional knowledge, and crowdsourcing as a popular

means of information collection. Considering these many challenges, how can online media be accountable to their professional obligations and to the public? In considering this question, the following section discusses the role of the audience.

2.5 Role of Audience in Media Accountability

In a parliamentary democratic system, the ministerial cabinet is accountable to the parliament, the parliament is accountable to the people, and other constitutional bodies are accountable to specified agencies. In the context of journalism, Solzhenitsyn (1978) asks, "[B]y what law has it [journalism] been elected and to whom is it responsible?" (cited in Christians, 1989, p.36). In a similar tone, British journalist Toby Webb, founder and managing director of London's Ethical Corporation, asks, "[W]ho holds these 'watchdogs' [media] accountable?" (Webb, 2009). These are serious questions about ongoing arbitrary media practices, and the exact answer is not easy to pinpoint. However, based on the opinions and arguments of different media scholars, the potential "parliament" that can hold journalists and media institutions accountable can be the public or audience. Painter and Hodges (2012) contend that media institutions may have multiple constituents to whom they are supposed to be accountable but that "their main constituents are the public and political society" (p.1).

Several scholars (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Groenhart, 2012; Joseph, 2011; McQuail, 2005; Ward & Wasserman, 2012) believe that active, conscious audiences can have an influential role in making media accountable to professional and public stakeholders. This notion applies to a greater extent in the online context, since every audience member can be a potential citizen journalist, and since digital platforms empower and encourage audiences to apply technological tools to create immediate pressures on columnists, newsrooms, or press councils (Ward &

Wasserman, 2012). Cenite & Zhang (2012) explain that "online tools enable new opportunities for audiences to hold media practitioners accountable and for journalists to fulfill their obligations to be accountable to audiences" (p. 37). Before the digital journalism era, letters to the editor were the main source of public involvement, but these were filtered through a tough gatekeeping mechanism, which meant that publishers' interests could be safeguarded and a favorable image could be selected. Ward and Wasserman (2012) argue that letters to the editor "are a limited mechanism for public input into mainstream press content" (p.25). At present, audiences using digital platforms are not only information recipients, but also active audiences who interact, debate, create, communicate and share information

Moreover, digital access by large audiences can play an influential role in making media accountable through the monitoring and critiquing of whether media content follows ethical standards and journalistic values, and whether it honors audience interests (Fengler, 2012; McQuail, 2005; Ward & Wasserman, 2012). For instance, Britain's Press Complaint Commission (PCC) received more than 25,000 complaints – a record number – after *Daily Mail* columnist Jan Moir wrote an article about Stephen Gately's death that described the events surrounding his death as "sleazy" and "less than respectable" (Robinson, 2010). The article, published on 16 October 2009 – six days after Gately's death – provoked outrage, with many readers expressing their anger through various social media outlets including Facebook and Twitter. Referring to the PCC code of ethics, the complainants claimed that the *Daily Mail* had broken the PCC's code of conduct on three fronts, arguing that it was inaccurate, intruded into private grief, and contained homophobic remarks. The deluge of comments and complaints from audiences worldwide pressured the PCC to investigate the issue and the journalists to rethink their professional obligations. Hence, it can be argued that the more access audiences have to online media content,

the more effectively they can act as citizen journalists, assessing the suitability of media content and providing critical feedback to improve the quality of media performance (Fengler, 2012).

As several media scholars (Friend and Singer, 2007; Hohman, 2011; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosentiel, 2007; Whitehouse, 2010) argue, media accountability can be governed by the same traditional codes of ethics on digital platforms as in traditional media, despite unique characteristics such as immediacy, interactivity, transparency, and global access. These unique characteristics lead to different malpractices on online platforms, such as speedy news updates, limited gatekeeping activities, post-publication correction, superficial reporting, and violations of codes of ethics. However, audiences are more active as citizen journalists on digital platforms, not only reading and reacting to the news, but also demanding quality information and pulling journalists back into the accountability frames. McQuail (1997) writes that media can fulfill public expectations by “publishing full, fair and reliable information; assisting in the expression of diverse and relevant opinions, including criticism of government; giving access to significant voices in society; facilitating the participation of citizens in social life; [and] abstaining from harmful propaganda” (p.514). Ward and Wasserman (2012) also recommend that the meaningful participation of the audience can be ensured if media houses and monitoring agencies create an environment in which audiences can participate in: (a) criticizing the practices of journalists and media, (b) discussing ethical principles, and (c) modifying or updating the principles of ethics (p.21).

This section has discussed the role of audiences in ensuring media accountability. Media audiences have a more significant role on digital platforms because of the availability of new media tools, which are easy, accessible and effective. Scholars (e.g., Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Cenite & Zhang, 2012; Groenhart, 2012; Joseph, 2011; McQuail, 2005; Ward & Wasserman,

2012) believe that the active role of audiences can make media accountable to professional and public stakeholders.

However, media consider mass audiences as a difficult stakeholder to be accountable to, since audiences are largely unorganized, non-interactive and manipulative (McQuail, 2005; Potter, 2011). Considering this challenge, the following section discusses various accountability mechanisms through which audiences can have an effective and meaningful role.

2.6. Media Accountability Mechanisms

The Hutchins Commission report notes that while responsibility is self-imposed, accountability requires mechanisms to enforce professional standards. This section deals with different media accountability modalities and practices in the context of online news media.

Like traditional media, online media require watchdog institutions to monitor their ethical practices because existing mechanisms for regulation are becoming obsolete (Kenney & Ozkan, 2012). Singer (2010) argues that new media accountability mechanisms are needed in order to address the ethical challenges created by the Internet. Yet traditional media monitoring institutions such as Press Councils, ombudsmen, and journalism trade unions are still being used to observe and regulate online media outlets.

Nearly seven decades ago, the Hutchins Commission recommended the establishment of "a new and independent agency to appraise and report annually upon the performance of the press" (Hutchins Commission, 1947, p.100). After the Hutchins Commission report, the drafting of codes of ethics, the formation of self-regulatory bodies (such as press councils and

ombudsmen), and the nurturing of feedback-receiving mechanisms have been encouraged and widely practiced throughout the world.

A press council is usually a national or provincial legal entity that monitors the activities of media outlets in order to hold them accountable by hearing complaints against them lodged by the general public or other stakeholders. According to the World Association of Press Councils, more than four dozen countries have press councils or similar organizations to ensure, encourage and monitor media accountability. The Press Council of India (PCI), established in 1966, has been widely considered a successful example of maintaining an accountable press. PCI writes:

Where the norms are breached and the freedom is defiled by unprofessional conduct, a way must exist to check and control it. But, control by Government or official authorities may prove destructive of this freedom. Therefore, the best way is to let the peers of the profession, assisted by a few discerning laymen, to regulate it through a properly structured representative impartial machinery. Hence, the Press Council. (Press Council of India, 2010, p.1)

Besides the press councils, the appointment of ombudsmen within media organizations by different institutions with varying degrees of authority has also been widely popular in European and North American countries as a means of ensuring media accountability. The ombudsman should "inform the public of what to expect from media and what media expects" and should "build public trust in journalism" (Elliot, 1987, as cited in Kenny & Ozkan, 2012, p.115). However, the role of ombudsmen seems less relevant, to some scholars, than that of press councils as journalism has shifted away from traditional newsroom structures to new online arrangements (Domingo & Heikkilä, 2012; Kenny & Ozkan, 2012). For instance, *The Washington Post* laid off its independent ombudsman in March 2013, ending a four-decade-long practice and replacing the ombudsman with a part-time employee to look after the concerns of audiences. The newspaper provided two reasons for this action: first, growing public access to

the Internet and social media has minimized the role of the ombudsman in getting audience grievances to management; second, it was a cost saving measure, as online journalism outlets have challenged the very existence of traditional media such as newspapers. Supporting this fact, Domingo and Heikkilä (2012) argue that in the context of the Internet and social media "every journalist is personally responsive to his/her readers" (p.283). Modern ombudsmen, according to Plaisance's (2000) critique, serve more as public relation agents, "beyond the realm of journalistic accountability," and therefore should not be considered a reliable mechanism of media accountability (p.262). Kenny and Ozkan (2012) observe that media ombudsmen have not been able to effectively monitor or ensure media accountability to their consumers, and that, therefore, press councils are important institutions for making news media more accountable by assessing the implementation of codes of ethics.

Some scholars (Friend & Singer, 2007; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; Ward & Wasserman, 2012) argue that blogs and micro-blogs can be another alternative for watching the media, which, left to themselves, usually remain silent when they violate codes of ethics. Also known as the "fifth estate," these blogs and micro-blogs observe and critique the fourth estate (often understood as traditional mainstream media) in order to hold them accountable for what they publish or broadcast, and why. Professional and citizen journalists on blogs and social media point out the ethical violations of mainstream media outlets, and criticize them for not holding themselves accountable by involving the general public in discussions of ethical issues (Ward & Wasserman, 2012). However, bloggers' criticism often seems one-sided, is largely ignored by journalists, and has a largely immeasurable impact (Friend & Singer, 2007). Ward and Wasserman (2012) introduce the "open ethics" concept, emphasizing the role of the audience during the media ethics formulation process. They argue that traditional media accountability

practices have been more directed toward professional journalists and media promoters, and less focused on audiences. They describe the traditional media ethics formulation process as "closed ethics" (Ward & Wasserman, 2012); in this process, audiences lack an effective role in controlling and shaping media discourse and outcomes. Today, new forms of communication such as blogs and social media have empowered audiences, from media consumers to citizen journalists. Therefore, Ward and Wasserman (2012) propose an "open ethics" approach, in which media guidelines are intended for a larger group of people. This approach allows meaningful participation by nonmembers, and also enables audiences to influence media content. The "open ethics" approach is "not only the concern of press councils, ombudsmen or the journalist's professional unions but also of all citizens" (Ward & Wasserman, 2012, p.20).

The existing practices of press councils and ombudsmen are under severe criticism because they are slow, relatively ineffective, and one-way, excluding audiences from the media accountability system. Cenite and Zhang (2012) argue that modern "conversations about journalistic ethics have largely remained monologues, despite the technical capability and some indications of a will to make them more dialogic" (p.48). Cenite and Zhang believe that partnerships between government agencies and media institutions may deliberately prevent audiences from participating in the media ethics development process. Without audience involvement, the process of crafting codes of ethics is likely to be less accountable (Cenite & Zhang, 2012). Media scholars (Cenite & Zhang, 2012; Kenny & Ozkan, 2012; Plaisance, 2000; Ward & Wasserman, 2012), therefore, discuss different kinds of mechanisms for ensuring media accountability through meaningful public participation. Plaisance (2000) notes that all dimensions of media accountability require frequent interaction. Therefore, he focuses on the "interactional element" as an important aspect of establishing and maintaining media

accountability, an aspect which can best be facilitated on digital platforms (p.266). Similarly, media ethics scholar Clifford Christians (1988) proposes the establishment of a collective accountability mechanism, through which the public would act as a key stakeholder (Plaisance, 2000). In response to the perceived need for such a mechanism, scholars such as Ward and Wasserman (2012), Painter and Hodges (2012) and Plaisance (2000) recommend that three-dimensional ethical frameworks require the observation, implementation and evaluation of the media accountability process through press councils, journalist trade unions, and the general public. Similarly, Kenny and Ozkan (2012) propose a triangulated accountability mechanism involving media promoters (owner/publishers), general audiences and professional journalists. Though some of the elements differ slightly, both of these modalities have prioritized the audience as a compulsory element in accountability mechanisms.

In addition, feedback receiving systems in all types of media (traditional and new) are one of the interactional elements that can hold media institutions accountable to the public. Getting feedback from audiences and reasonable responses from concerned journalists are among the most ideal ways of making media accountable, as online feedback mechanisms encourage the public to communicate their grievances against the news media (Cenite & Zhang, 2012). Cenite and Zhang (2012) go further, recommending, as an effective accountability practice, the publication of audience comments even when criticisms are severe and highlight organizational errors and ethical lapses that may undermine institutional credibility. In such situations, news organizations could develop policies that outline criteria for responding to audience feedback (such as when comments suggest violations of journalistic ethics) or that foster greater dialogue between journalists and audiences. For an ideal feedback mechanism in online news media, Cenite and Zhang (2012) recommend the following three steps: a) set

policies on when to allow and edit comments, b) allow all relevant and non-abusive complaints, and c) respond to feedback immediately.

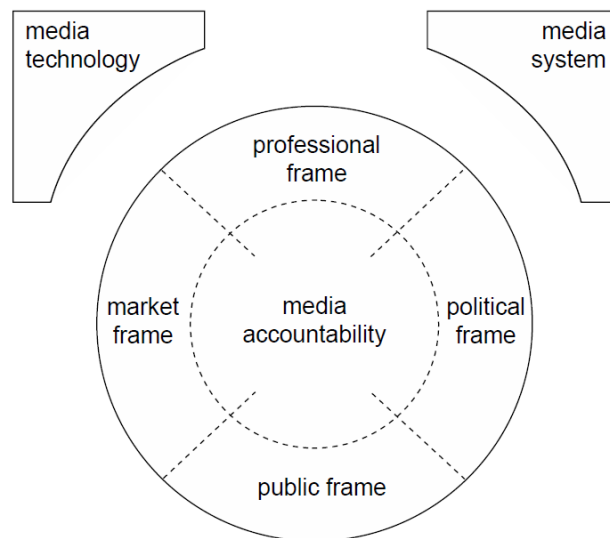
To sum up, this section has highlighted the importance of regulatory mechanisms for ensuring accountability in all kinds of media outlets, including those online. Traditionally, press councils and ombudsmen have been the main practitioners of accountability, but in the era of new media, blogs and micro-blogs are doing much of the work as the watchdogs of the watchdogs. Despite their focus on upholding and maintaining media accountability, none of these watchdogs have been free from criticism. For instance, traditional accountability institutions such as press councils and ombudsmen have been criticized for their slow and relatively ineffective performance, and blogs and micro-blogs have been criticized because of their unorganized nature and potential individual biases. Scholars believe that traditional accountability mechanisms are largely inclined to favor media promoters and journalists and ignore the potential accountability role of the audience. They identify the need for an interactional and participatory role for audiences in order to ensure media's responsibility and accountability to their audiences.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

Media need to be accountable to different stakeholders for different purposes. This section presents an overview of media stakeholders based on the "four frames of accountability" developed and interpreted by various scholars including Christians (1989), McQuail (2003), Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004), and Krogh (2012). Since this thesis study aims to assess the state of online journalism in Nepal in regard to accountability, the four frames of accountability are a useful critical tool.

Since media accountability to various stakeholders is an abstract concept (Dennis et al. 1989), scholars (Dennis, Gillmor & Glasser, 1989; McQuail, 2003; Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004) have, over the years, attempted to concretize this abstract idea by introducing four frames of accountability for news media. However, each scholar has used slightly different terminology (such as "model", "instrument", and "stakeholder") to

Figure 2: Media accountability frames
(Krogh, 2012, p.21)



indicate the frame concept. Dennis et al. (1989) suggest four "models" of media accountability that include the *market-place model*, the *self-regulatory model*, the *fiduciary model*, and the *legal model*. McQuail (2003; 2005) modifies the same concept, describing it as "four frames" of media accountability, which include *legal — regulatory frame*, *financial* (market frame), *public frame*, and *professional frame*. For their part, Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) name four accountability "instruments": *political accountability*, *market accountability*, *public accountability*, and *professional accountability*.

The four frames of accountability, because of their capacity to aid analysis of the interest-driven focus of media institutions on particular stakeholders, can be a useful tool for analyzing the status of online journalism in Nepal.

Political (or legal) frame. Media accountability in the *political frame* is maintained through obedience to existing laws and regulations and through punishments for disobedience. Issues such as intellectual property rights, ownership and monopoly, free expression, claims of

harm to individuals, and censorship can be discussed under this frame. McQuail (2005) writes that the political or legal frame refers to "all public policies, laws and regulations that affect media structure and operation" (p.212) in order to maintain free expression, to advance social betterment, and to limit potential harm.

The strength of the political/legal frame of accountability is its power and degree of compulsion, which can effectively enforce media obligations. Gillmor (1989) argues that "accountability is a response to power, and that different media have different amounts of power, and that we might, therefore, consider different legal rules for different media" (p.5). Violation of legal obligations can cause negative outcomes because the political frame wields a substantial power threat and allows a high degree of compulsion. Modern democratic societies consider laws and regulations to be the supreme form of obligation, with the capacity to control abuse of power and to set "limits to freedom for purposes of protecting the rights of others and taking care of the general good of society" (McQuail, 1997, p.521).

However, the political frame has drawbacks. For instance, implementation of the frame can be coercive, and legal consequences can be harsh and confrontational. Hence, this frame may encourage censorship due to fears of severe punishment. Laws are also non-negotiable and difficult to change as the situation changes. Therefore, scholars (Anderson, 1989; Christians, 1989; McQuail, 1997) opine that the political/legal frame of accountability is difficult to exercise in day-to-day practice, but it is often useful as a last resort.

Market (or financial) frame. The *market frame* refers to "the system of supply and demand, in which the free choices of the public are given free reign, and considerations of efficiency also play a role" (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004, p. 9). Accountability to the market is crucial because media outlets' relationships to corporate agencies tend to generate revenues,

sponsorship, and financial support. As a consequence, media promoters may disregard media professionalism in favor of the motive of revenue collection. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) observe that most media promoters want their news people to foster their interests and to be accountable to them, and that many journalists in the US are provided performance bonuses on those bases.

The market frame covers a wide range of issues, including the effects of competition, choice, profitability, and supply and demand on the quality of communication products and services. McQuail (1997, 2003, & 2005) argues that freedom of choice, efficiency, profitability, and majority preference are the key elements of the market frame. According to McQuail, freedom of choice can create competition, which encourages good performance and discourages bad practices. McQuail (2003) and Merrill (1989) assume that the market frame lessens the degree of compulsion and enhances freedom of choice because the market system works in an open and self-correcting way. Free market principles support the freedom to publish and to receive communication. The system of supply and demand fosters a particular balance of media production and dissemination based on the preference of the audience, and the profit motives of media promoters.

Media institutions that emphasize the market frame are usually highly commercialized and often focus on profits (McQuail, 2003). The recent development of media chains and conglomerates can be a serious threat to media accountability due to lessened competition and increased monopoly, and because powerful media outlets do not respond the grievances of the public (Merrill, 1989). Moreover, media institutions often neglect the issue of quality when there is a market monopoly, and instead pursue popular content and consumer interests. McQuail

(1997) believes that "profitable and popular content is not necessarily 'good' content and serving the needs of consumers is not the same as serving citizens' need" (p.524).

Public (or audience) frame. The emergence of new communication technologies and the broadening scope of the media have made the audience or general public an active part of the accountability process (Bardoel & d'Haenens (2004). In the *public frame* of accountability, news media organizations develop direct relationships with audiences (listeners, users, readers, viewers, visitors, etc.) through different activities such as conducting regular market research, handling complaints, and responding effectively to feedback. It is the best fitting frame "for expressing and implementing the public interest and holding free media to account in a free society" (McQuail, 1997, p.524). Even though the public frame is complex and less clearly defined than the other frames, it maintains a more direct relationship with the public through a participatory and interactive approach. It falls within the scope of social responsibility theory as propounded by the Hutchins Commission in 1947, and its primary concerns are social welfare and public betterment. In this frame, compulsion is voluntary and sometimes overlaps with the market frame (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; McQuail, 1997, 2003 & 2005; Krogh, 2012). Referring to this frame, McQuail (2005) writes that "media organizations are also social institutions that fulfill [...] certain important public tasks that go beyond their immediate goals of making profits" (p.213).

The audience itself becomes an important part of the public frame of accountability, which also includes pressure groups, media consumer organizations, public welfare councils, marginalized or minority groups, and so forth (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 2005). The public frame encourages audiences to interact and participate through direct questions, criticism, and expression of concerns. When a particular media outlet fails to

maintain its professional obligations, critical feedback from the public can get the media outlet back on the professionalism track. Merrill (1989) argues that media are accountable to the public for their existence and growth because media are interactive by nature and directed by people, and that media managers try their best to address the expectations of the people because they are accountable to them.

The public frame of accountability is a completely voluntary frame. Because of this, McQuail (2005) warns that big media chains and conglomerates can ignore the public's interest in responding to them, and may thereby undermine this model. The public frame is also fragmentary by nature because it has weak means of implementation and requires an educated citizenry to effectively voice their concerns. To this end, the involvement of civil society organizations or other interest groups can be beneficial in making media hear public concerns (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004). The effectiveness of this model depends very much on the traditions of a particular media system and on an active participatory democracy (McQuail, 1997)

Professional (or self-regulatory) frame. The fourth or *professional* (or *self-regulatory*) frame of media accountability refers to the maintenance of journalistic autonomy, professional standards and credibility through conformity to ethical codes and the fostering of public trust (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004). The professional frame strives to "maintain a balance between freedom to publish, the needs of media industries and the wider interests of society, and its constituent individuals and groups" (McQuail, 1997, p. 523). In this frame, journalists develop their own standards for professional excellence and aspire to uphold professional obligations voluntarily. Clifford Christians (1989) observes that media codes of ethics are the visible institutional indicators of the professional practice of fulfilling obligations to various media

stakeholders. In McQuail's (2005) terms, the professional frame "aims to protect the interests of the industry by self-regulation" (p.214) and prevents possible external interference in media autonomy, particularly from government functionaries.

In 1947, the Hutchins Commission recommended that media should be responsible for working in the public interest, that journalistic standards "must be administered by the press itself," and that "self-correction is better than outside correction" (p.126). Today, most professional journalism institutions have developed an ethical framework in the form of codes of ethics to serve the interests of the audience and to remain accountable to them. Such codes identify minimum standards of journalistic performance, which should not be infringed upon for individual or profit-making motives (McQuail, 1997). McQuail (2005) assumes that the professional frame of accountability is likely to work because it is voluntary, self-regulating, non-coercive, and self-interested.

However, there are two substantial limitations of this accountability frame: first, professionalism has not been strongly developed within media institutions and, as a consequence, media practitioners have rather little autonomy from media management and promoters (McQuail, 2005). A second limitation of this frame, as identified by Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004), is that it can influence the horizontal structure (such as professional journalists and their peers in different media houses), but cannot easily motivate people in vertical structures (such as media promoters and the public). Fengler (2012) seems more critical of the malpractices that the self-regulatory frame of accountability allows. According to Fengler, when a journalist breaches codes of ethics, he or she is not fired; instead, his or her unethical practices typically are not publicized and usually are kept secret as a face-saving measure by the media house. Even if the

journalist is fired, he or she is likely to get another, similar job in another media outlet without much difficulty.

Rationale for the frame selection. There are some features that overlap from one frame to another, but no frame is perfect and complete; strengths and weaknesses can be discerned in each frame (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Christians, 1989; McQuail, 2003 & 2005).

The scope of this research study is specifically limited to whether online news media in Nepal are responsible and accountable to the public and the Nepalese society, as scholars believe that receiving feedback, correcting errors, and providing platforms for diverse ideas are easier on digital platforms than in traditional media (Fengler, 2012; Friend & Singer, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Joseph, 2011). This study, therefore, focuses on the third and fourth frames of accountability in online news media for the following three reasons:

First, prominent media scholars on media accountability (Anderson, 1989; Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Christians, 1989; Fengler, 2012; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Hutchins Commission, 1947; Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 2005; Merrill, 1989; Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000) have strongly recommended that the self-regulatory and public participation frames ought to be the primary alternatives employed in any media outlet.

Second, if journalists or media institutions remain accountable only to political or market stakeholders, the media will no longer be socially responsible (Krogh, 2012). In addition, political and market accountability leads media toward authoritarian or commercial interests and away from professional journalistic norms (Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 1997; Heikkilä et al., 2012).

Finally, scholars (such as Friend & Singer, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Joseph, 2011) have argued that digital platforms stimulate media accountability and transparency via interactive features that enable audiences to react, interact, engage in dialogue, and collaborate in

the news-making process. The public and professional frames of media accountability are close and complementary, and the real spirit of socially responsible news media lies in these two frames (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004).

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been ascertained that accountability is a crucial aspect of professional journalism in any media format. This chapter has presented an overview of media accountability with regard to online news media including present-day trends, challenges to accountability, the role of audiences, and about the need for regulatory mechanisms in order to ensure accountability on digital platforms. Similarly, the chapter has also discussed the theoretical framework of media accountability by assessing various scholarly literatures that are relevant to examine the state of online media.

Several media scholars argue that online news media can ensure and enhance accountability on digital platforms due to their unique features, such as interactivity, transparency, immediacy, global accessibility, a high volume of audience participation, and the availability of unlimited space. However, several new types of challenges created by digital platforms (for instance, speedy updates, post-publication correction, post deletion, and increased plagiarism) can prevent online news from being accountable to public and professional stakeholders. From a review of scholarly articles, it can be seen that traditional accountability mechanisms such as press councils and ombudsmen have largely ignored audiences as stakeholders; thus, the active role of audiences can make online media more accountable to the public due to the unique features available on digital platforms. However, most accountability-related media studies concentrate on developed (European and North American) countries, and

very few studies have been done focusing on developing countries. Could we come to the same conclusions if similar studies were conducted in a developing country where audiences cannot, to the same extent, actively participate on digital platforms in order to make online news media accountable? In pursuing the answer to this question, it will be important to study how online journalists in Nepal are working to maintain professional accountability, what their key challenges for ensuring accountability are, and what the role of audiences is in making news media accountable to society.

The following chapter provides a detailed rationale for the research methodology selected in response to these research question and sub-questions.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research strategy, methods and procedures employed for this research project. The following topics are explored: qualitative research, research design, methodological triangulation, data sampling, ethical approval, data collection, and data analysis.

3.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methods are employed in this study because they are able to provide a more comprehensive account of the unique contextual elements and intricacies of the Nepali situation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Yin, 2009). Many scholars (e.g., Berg, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Neuman & Robson, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Yin, 2009) argue that human experience can best be researched through the use of qualitative data. Berg (2001) writes:

Qualitative procedures provide a means of accessing unquantifiable facts about the actual people researchers observe and talk to or people represented by their personal traces (such as letters, photographs, newspaper accounts, diaries, and so on). As a result, qualitative techniques allow researchers to share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives. Researchers using qualitative techniques examine how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others. (p.7)

In qualitative research, data is collected through various methods including interviews, field notes, observations, personal journals, and other pictorial or written materials (Deacon, Pickering, Golding & Murdock, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Neuman & Robson, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Thomson, 2011). The interview is one of the most frequently used data collection methods in qualitative research (Thomson, 2011). In interviews, participants express themselves in ways that are typical of how they speak, think, and organize reality in their everyday lives (Neuman & Robson, 2012). Neuman and Robson (2012) write:

The qualitative interview involves asking questions, listening, expressing interest, and recording what was said. It is a joint production of a researcher and an

interviewee. Interviewees are active participants whose insights, feelings, and cooperation are essential parts of a discussion process that reveals subjective meanings. (p.251)

3.2 Research Design

This study employs the case study research method, which allows the researcher to explore individuals, communities, organizations and industries from the perspectives of change, relations, and performance (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2009). Qualitative case study method is "a systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe, explain or explore the phenomenon of interests" (Bromley, 1990, p.302). Robert Yin (2009) asserts that case study research is important for studying contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts. He identifies the six most commonly used data collection sources for case study research: interviews, documentation review, archival records, direct observation, physical observation, and physical artifacts.

Since all data collection sources are complementary and have their own strengths and weaknesses, Yin (2009) recommends using more than one data collection method in order to take advantage of the complementarity of the data sources. Therefore, data for this study have been gathered from multiple sources. Three different data collection sources including interviews, documentary review, and archival records have been used because (a) no single data source is perfect for collecting all information, and (b) the use of multiple sources is highly complementary, increasing the reliability of available data (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2009). In this study, the *interview* method is essential for revealing human ideas and perceptions on the research theme. *Document review* is useful for assessing current accountability practices on digital media platforms and also for comparing the data obtained from the interviews. *Archival*

records are used for assessing whether or not accountability indicators have been employed consistently by the interview participants.

3.3 Data Triangulation

In qualitative research, triangulation is a method for checking and establishing the validity of the research by analyzing research problems from multiple perspectives. Researchers use triangulation methods in order to ensure that the findings of qualitative research accurately reflect the situation and are adequately supported by the evidence. According to Patton (2002), there are four types of triangulation, namely *data triangulation*, *investigator triangulation*, *theory triangulation* and *methodological triangulation* (as cited in Yin, 2009, p. 116). As Patton (2002) writes, data triangulation means using multiple data sources instead of relying on a single source; investigator triangulation refers to employing several researchers during the research process; theory triangulation denotes the use of multiple theoretical perspectives to interpret a single set of data; and methodological triangulation involves the use of multiple research methods (qualitative and/or quantitative) to study a research problem.

Scholars (Bitsch, 2005; Yin, 2009) note that the use of only one data source can encourage biases due to the tendencies of the particular data collection method. Using a combination of multiple methods, on the other hand, can reduce possible misrepresentations and increase the validity of the research. Therefore, this research study employs data triangulation by involving three different data sources (interviews, documentation review and archival records) to study the accountability status of online news media in Nepal. Such triangulation helps to establish the validity of research when the findings from the different data sources are the same or similar.

3.4 Data Sampling

Data sampling provides a basis for deciding on an adequate and appropriate sampling strategy, and also signals how broadly the findings can be generalized. Deacon et al. (2007) state that "qualitative research tends to use small samples which are generated more informally and organically than those typically used in quantitative research" (p.45). The interview participants for this study are selected using the purposive sampling method, which can be beneficial for in-depth investigation and the acquisition of in-depth knowledge (Neuman & Robson, 2012). Without purposive sampling, a researcher may not be able "to select unique cases that are [...] informative" or "to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 132).

On a randomly selected date, the five most-viewed news portals in Nepal are identified using Alexa Internet, a web-tracking software that analyzes the ranking of websites.² On the same day, five news stories from each portal (for a total of twenty-five) are selected using convenience sampling (beginning from the top of the portals). Convenience sampling is easy, fast, and inexpensive, and subjects are readily available (Deacon et al., 2007; Neuman & Robson, 2012). Based on the selected twenty-five news stories, the highest-ranked and most experienced editor and reporter from each of the five news portals are identified and contacted via email, for a total of 10 participants. Then after, the ten online journalists are selected (one

² Alexa Internet, Inc. is a US-based web tracking company founded in 1996 by two American web entrepreneurs, Brewster Kahle and Bruce Gilliat. As of 2013, it provides traffic data, global rankings and other information on 30 million websites based on major web browsers (e.g., Internet Explorer, Firefox, Google Chrome), and claims that 6 million people visit its website monthly. According to a research study in 2002, the American Library of Congress has also used information from Alexa Internet that measures the quality of Web pages by tracing consumers' use of the Web. See their official web page at www.alexa.com for more information.

from the reporting and one from the editing departments of each news portal) to obtain different perspectives of journalists experienced in the field and in the newsroom.

In addition, five news stories contributed by interview participants representing reporting departments (one report from each journalist) are selected from the news portals' archives in advance of the interview dates to assess the consistency of participating journalists with regard to their accountability practices on digital platforms.

3.5 Ethical Approval

For research involving human subjects, issues such as confidentiality, anonymity and consent are important (Deacon et al., 2007; Neuman & Robson, 2012; Yin 2009). Because this study requires interviews with human subjects, ethical clearance is necessary. Therefore, adequate ethical clearance is obtained prior to data collection (See Appendix 4 for Ethics Approval Certificate). According to the terms of this approval, the researcher should respect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and also should ensure the proper use of the information provided. In this study, the anonymity of the participants is important because the participants are asked to comment not only about their own work experiences, but also about organizational policies that may contradict institutional codes of conduct. Without assurances of anonymity they may have not have freely expressed their opinions.

In approaching each participant, the researcher explains what informed consent entailed in regard to the recorded semi-structured interview, which is approximately 45-60 minutes in length. The researcher also informs the participant about the purpose of the research, answers queries, and obtains written consent before the interview commenced. No participant is forced to participate in this research against his/her free will, and each participant is assured that all

information that can identify them will be systematically coded. Since this is an academic study and no incentive is given to participants, each participant's most convenient time and location for the interview are taken into consideration. As participants may be interested in reading the results of the research, the summary of the research findings can be provided to participants after the research is complete. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher will ask the participant in question to sign a consent form; however, the participant can terminate his/her participation in the project at any time without reprisal (See Appendixes 5 and 6 for the Invitation Letter to Participants and the Consent Form).

3.6 Data Collection

Following ethical approval for the project, data collection begins, starting with identification of the five most-viewed news portals in Nepal on a randomly selected date, and the selection of five news stories from each news portal (beginning from the top of the portal) for content analysis from the perspective of media accountability. In addition, five news stories recently contributed by interview participants representing reporting departments (one news report from each reporter) are tracked from the archives of the news portals, in order to assess the consistency of accountability practices and to increase the reliability of the research through corroboration with the findings from the twenty-five stories.

This stage of the data collection process is followed by semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1), which allow the researcher for additional probe when necessary (Berg, 2001; Neuman & Robson, 2012). Each interview is conducted away from the participant's workplace in a quiet location (for example, in a nearby restaurant) for the sake of confidentiality, ensuring that the participant can express him/herself freely. The anonymized data is identified with study

codes, and is kept in a password-protected computer which is used only by the researcher and which is not shared with anybody else except the research supervisor.

The interview questions intend to cover the participants' conceptual understanding of media accountability, ethical practices on digital platforms with regard to media accountability, present-day accountability trends and challenges, the role of the audience in media accountability, and the impact of the digital divide on maintaining accountability in online news media. Robert Yin (1990) states that questions in case study research interviews should be subjective and flexible in order to facilitate investigation of topics raised by the interviewee. The interviews for this study are based on the questions listed in Appendix 1, and are expanded by the researcher in order to get a better idea of each participant's knowledge and experience of the subject matter. On the basis of the literature review and research questions, a total of nine interview questions are included in the interview canvas, followed by a series of sub-questions. The first four questions aim to get participants to share their knowledge and perceptions of media ethics in Nepal with a focus on media accountability. The next three questions are developed specifically to explore the status of, and challenges to, media accountability in contemporary Nepal, and the final two questions are designed to identify the role of the audience and the impact of the digital divide on media accountability in online news media in Nepal.

Making audio recordings of interviews is the preferred method of record keeping because it provides "a more accurate rendition of any interview than any other method" (Yin, 2009, p.109). Therefore, all the interviews for this study are recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated later by the researcher (most of the participants chose to do their interviews in Nepali). A digital audio recording device is used to record the interviews in order to ensure sound quality and dependability. Neuman and Robson (2012) note that completely transcribing interviews can

be the best way to ensure the dependability and trustworthiness of the findings. In this study, the researcher is well aware that even though "transcribing qualitative interviews is a time-consuming process, it should be done as soon as possible after the interview has taken place" in order to decode audio material to avoid difficulty in understanding the sequence of events or ideas. (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p.256).

3.7 Data Analysis

Over time, qualitative data analysis has become more precise and clear even though the analysis cannot be generalized or widely accepted as in quantitative research (Deacon, et al., 2007; Neuman & Robson, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, Yin, 2009). In this study, data are derived from three different data sources: document review of twenty-five news stories, archival records of five news stories, and semi-structured interviews with ten online journalists,. Among them, the first two data sources are compared with different external sources and are analysed on the basis of accountability criteria drawn from CAJ ethics guidelines (CAJ, 2011) and the Code of Journalistic Ethics for Nepali journalists (PCN, 2008).

Moreover, semi-structured interview data are coded and analyzed using conventional content analysis method. In this method, thematic codes are developed from the available data, patterns are detected, and linkages among the codes are identified in order to analyze the content (Neuman & Robson, 2012). Though data coding is a time consuming work, it reduces a big volume of raw data into a manageable size, and allows a researcher to retrieve the relevant parts of data easily and quickly, and also to organize data into thematic patterns (Neuman & Robson, 2012; Yin, 2009).

Neuman and Robson (2012) affirm that "a researcher can code more than one type of data source during single research project" (p.316). The researcher, therefore, reviews and analyzes the initial data obtained from semi-structured interviews using an open coding approach in order to identify major themes related to utilization and barriers based on participant perspectives (see, for example, Neuman & Robson, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding is a method of analyzing qualitative research data that allows the researcher to break down and examine data, and then compare and conceptualize it (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the data analysis process for this study, the researcher familiarizes himself with the data and develops a list of patterns through an axial coding process, in which the researcher "review[s] and examine[s] initial codes and create[s] linkages between them" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, 317). Then selective coding, the final stage of the coding process, begins, in which the patterns are organized into potential themes and relevant data are sorted according to these themes. In addition, all of the themes are refined and various definitions are created for each theme.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has provided explanation and justification for the research methodology used for this study. The qualitative research method has allowed the researcher to access a comprehensive view of the participants' experience and knowledge of media accountability within their professional sphere. Using various sampling methods (such as random, convenience, and purposeful), data sources are identified, and information is collected using three different methods: interview, documentation review, and archival records. The interview is the main data collection method, comprising ten semi-structured interviews with online journalists in Nepal. Document review of twenty-five news stories are used to assess the media accountability situation in practice, and for verifying the findings of the interviews. Furthermore, five news

stories archived in the news portals have been selected and analyzed in order to evaluate the consistency of accountability in reporting and editing online news stories. The three different data collection methods are triangulated to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, and to reduce potential biases resulting from particular methods of data collection. The conventional content analysis method is applied for the analysis of interview content. News story contents are analyzed based on the criteria of accountability mentioned in the Ethics Guidelines of the Canadian Journalists Association and in the Code of Journalistic Ethics for Nepali journalists by Press Council Nepal.

Before presenting the findings of the research study, a brief overview of Nepali media is given below, which is very relevant to understand the background of the research findings.

AN OVERVIEW OF NEPALI MEDIA

This section presents an overview of the Nepali media landscape along with a brief political profile of the country. If we look back at the history of Nepali media, newspapers have the longest history, followed by radio and television. Online media in Nepal have passed a decade, and still need to be institutionalized through legal provisions, greater recognition as mainstream media, and professional practices. Nepali media have been suffering due to various challenges, including political polarization, unprofessional practices, lack of adequate investments, and insufficient market resources. A huge digital divide has challenged the effectiveness of online media in Nepal, as barely one-fourth of people have access to the Internet, severely limiting the reach of digital platforms (NTA, 2014). This section also briefly describes the role of the press council in ensuring ethical practices in traditional and new media.

Nepal's Political Profile:

Sandwiched between India and China, Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia with a diverse geographical landscape that includes high mountains, valleys and plains. Until it was declared a republic in 2008, Nepal had been ruled by monarchs of different dynasties for two millennia (Kharel, 2014). Multi-party democracy was briefly introduced in 1951, but King Mahendra suspended the parliamentary system a decade later. Then he introduced a partyless system called Panchayat, which spanned twenty-nine years beginning in 1960 (Devkota, 1967). After three decades, however, the parliamentary system was restored in 1990, after which frequent changes of government were the main political problem (Media Foundation, 2012). In the meantime, a decade-long government-Maoist conflict erupted, leaving at least thirteen thousand people dead and thirteen hundred missing (OHCHR, 2012). The conflict ended with a peace accord signed in November 2006, and the political parties agreed to abolish the monarchy

in December 2007 (IFAMMN. (2012). The last King Gyanendra was ousted from the throne in 2008 and the republic was declared by the parliament. In 2008, the Constitution Assembly was set up to prepare and promulgate the constitution of Nepal as a republic, but it was dissolved after four years without producing a constitution (Media Foundation, 2012). The second Constitution Assembly was set up after the November 19, 2013 election, but political instability is still prevalent due to a hung parliament (BBC, 2014).

Historical Overview

Prime Minister Janga Bahadur brought a printing press to Nepal from England in 1851 and installed it in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal (Devkota, 1967). Fifty years later, the press was used to publish *Gorkhapatra*, a weekly newspaper (daily since 1961), as a government mouthpiece. As democracy was introduced in 1951, hundreds of newspapers were launched, "marking the beginning of a new era in print media" (Media Foundation, 2012, p.7). The first radio station, called Radio Nepal, was established in 1951, but its coverage was significantly limited and the availability of radio equipment was rare (Devkota, 1967).

During the Panchayat era (1960-1989), a number of state-run media organizations were established, such as the news agency Rastriya Samachar Samiti in 1961, Press Council Nepal (PCN) in 1971, and Nepal Television in 1985 (Kharel, 2006). The Gorkhapatra Corporation, which published multiple newspapers and magazines, and the national broadcaster, Radio Nepal, were already under government control as a means of promoting the ideals of the regime (Kharel, 2006). There were a limited number of newspapers published in the private sector, which were tightly censored to make sure their information did not go against the autocratic regime (Kharel, 2006).

After a popular uprising, multi-party democracy was restored in 1990, and the constitution of Nepal was launched in the same year. These developments ensured "a liberal environment enabling an upsurge in the number of independent media outlets" (Media Foundation, 2012, p.7). The publication of private-sector broadsheet newspapers with large-scale investment introduced a trend toward independent, professional journalism in Nepal (Humagain et al., 2007). Likewise, local radio stations began to be established in 1997, and private television channels began four years later (Humagain et al., 2007). The Internet was introduced in 1993, and print media content was first available online in 1995 by *The Kathmandu Post*, an English-language broadsheet newspaper (Sedhai, 2012). In 1998, Mercantile Communications, a corporate institution, launched *nepalnews.com* as a platform for newspapers to upload their news content into cyberspace (Sharma, 2007). Moreover, true online news portals began in 2000 with the launch of *kantipuronline.com*, which started reporting and webcasting online news contents in addition to uploading newspaper contents (Acharya, 2005).

Legal Framework

The Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) guarantees media rights including freedom of expression and the right to information. There are a number of laws and regulations in place to execute and ensure these constitutional rights. The Press and Publication Act (1991), the National Broadcasting Act (1992), the Press Council Act (1992), the Working Journalists Act (2007), and the Right to Information Act (2008) are the major ones. However, the International Fact-Finding Mission argues that the constitutional spirit of media rights has not been "followed up with appropriate legislations and regulations" (IFAMMN, 2012, p.33). The Press and Publication Act (1991) requires every newspaper or magazine to be registered by local authorities. In addition, the Act prohibits publishing anything that undermines sovereignty or jeopardizes security, peace

and harmony, and also prohibits the publication of material considered contrary to decent public behavior. Similarly, the National Broadcasting Act (1993) authorizes the government to regulate the broadcasting of a wide range of materials on a variety of topics that might be considered disruptive or deleterious, and allows the government to revoke licenses for breaches of the Act or any applicable rules.

The Press Council Act, 1992, establishes Press Council Nepal as an autonomous and independent body for monitoring and regulating media performance (IMMN, 2008; Press Council Act, 1992). However, the law fails to provide structural guarantees for that autonomy and independence, as all PCN members are appointed by the government through an opaque selection process (IMMN, 2008). The remaining two acts ensure the right to information and the rights of working journalists, but neither act has been implemented in the true spirit of the Interim Constitution (IMMN, 2008). Moreover, there is not a single law that directly addresses online media issues. In cases against online media, online journalists are arrested as per the Electronic Transaction Act, 2008, which can strictly limit the right to freedom of expression ensured in the Constitution (IFAMMN, 2012).

Current Status

Print media dominates the Nepali media landscape according to numbers, and plays an influential role in the socio-political milieu (Kharel, 2006; Media Foundation, 2012). There were 3408 newspapers registered in 2013; among them, 134 dailies, 4 bi-weeklies, 559 weeklies, and 36 fortnightlies were found to have been publishing regularly (UNESCO, 2013). Including all the big media houses, which produce at least fourteen broadsheet newspapers, around half of the country's total newspapers are published from the Kathmandu valley, and are then delivered throughout the country (Media Foundation, 2012). The remaining newspapers, published from

outside the valley, are also mostly city-centric, owing to the difficult geographic setting of two-thirds of the country's area (Kharel, 2006; Media Foundation, 2012). Among newspapers in Nepal, Nepali is the predominant language, English is the second most popular language among educated people, and more than twenty indigenous languages are represented in newspapers published in their respective communities (Media Foundation, 2012).

Radio is the most popular form of mass media in Nepal, with radio stations collectively covering almost all parts of the country (Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). Radio Nepal, the state-run broadcaster, alone reaches over 85% of the total population through its nationwide broadcast network and FM relay stations across the country (JICA, 2013). Nepal became a pioneer in community-based FM radio in South Asia in the mid-1990s by licensing Radio Sagarmatha. According to the Ministry of Information and Communication of Nepal, five hundred and fifteen broadcasting licenses for FM radio stations were issued by the end of 2013, among which three hundred and sixty were in regular service (MOIC, 2013). Similarly, the Ministry issued fifty-seven licences for television broadcasting, among which two dozen channels were in regular operation. Most of the operating TV channels are centered in Kathmandu, but a couple of channels are being set up in regional cities. Nepal Television, the state broadcaster, covers 72% of the total population and 50% of the geographic area through terrestrial and satellite networking (ITU, 2012). The Media Foundation notes that the total coverage of all TV channels may be between 50% and 60% of households in Nepal, but no accurate figures are available from the government agency (Media Foundation, 2012).

Online news has been a very popular medium in recent years, owing to multiple features such as accessibility, interactivity, transparency, multimedia format, immediacy and inexpensiveness. Some of the most visited Nepali news portals in February 2014 were

onlinekhabar.com (Nepali), *ekantipur.com* (bilingual), *nagariknews.com* (Nepali), *setopati.com* (bilingual), *nepalnews.com* (English), *ujyaloonline.com* (Nepali), *myrepublica.com* (English), *himalkhabar.com* (Nepali), and *thehimalayantimes.com* (English), according to Alexa Internet (see, *alexa.com*), a web traffic analyzing portal. The PCN does not keep a record of online media institutions since there is no legal provision yet in place to govern online media. Online Media Association Nepal states that there are more than three hundred online news portals in different languages in Nepal (Ekantipur, 2013b). Many traditional media outlets have an online presence, through which they can reproduce already published or broadcast media content (UNESCO, 2013). Moreover, many journalists in Nepal rely on online media and social media to find news clues or issues and develop them as mature news stories (FNJ, 2012). However, personal blogs and other forms of social media are still in a development phase, and are mostly confined to the urban public and techno-savvy people (Media Foundation, 2012).

Key Challenges

Nepali media have been facing a number of challenges, from the policy level to the organizational level (Acharya, 2005; IMMN, 2008; Kharel, 2006; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). Undue political influence on journalistic content, unprofessional media practices (such as, plagiarism, sponsored content and infringement of privacy), issues of market support and revenue collection, and the digital divide are some of the major challenges briefly described below:

Political influence. Nepali media have suffered from the undue influence of various political parties (Acharya, 2005; Kharel, 2006; IMMN, 2008; Media Foundation, 2012). For instance, political mission journalism was practiced during the Panchayat regime by a number of media outlets that opposed the regime (Media Foundation, 2012). At present, a political

polarization trend in media institutions is growing. Most journalists in Nepal are members of different political media wings, such as the Press Union (affiliated with the Nepali Congress Party), Press Chautari Nepal (affiliated with the Communist Party of Nepal – United Marxist and Leninist), and the Revolutionary Journalists' Association (affiliated with the Unified Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist) (UNESCO, 2013). Regarding the impact of the fluid political scene on the Nepali media, the International Fact-Finding Mission writes that there was "a sense of increased partisan polarization in a section of the press, and there were discernible efforts [through policy or other inducements] by the government and political parties to control the media" (IFAMMN, 2012, p. 9).

Moreover, the Federation of Nepali Journalists' (FNJ) election most often looks like a political campaign, as candidates representing different political media wings are most likely to win the election (Media Foundation, 2012). Furthermore, there is a high level of political orientation among FNJ members, and many of them come from non-journalistic academic backgrounds. The International Media Mission observes that the privately owned broadsheet dailies in Nepal are largely independent, but most of the small-scale media outlets are "close to or even identify with and pledge allegiance to different political parties" (IMMN, 2008, p. 19). As a consequence, journalist members are more focused on political activism than on contributing to professional excellence and ethical norms (Media Foundation, 2012). Similarly, the undue influence of political parties on media organizations and journalists has "diminished the ability of media to provide unbiased coverage of and facilitate a dialogue on the complex transition underway in Nepal" (IMMN, 2008, p. 9). Professor P. Kharel believes that most journalists in Nepal do not always work for a professional cause; rather, they are "working as party functionaries through the all-pervading political unionism that infects every aspect of

organised life" (2014, p.4). Moreover, state-funded media (including two daily newspapers, the national radio network, two television channels, and a news agency) are closely allied with the government or the ruling party (KC, 2009; Kharel, 2006; Media Foundation, 2012; IMMN, 2008). Prof. Kharel (2006) notes that government-owned media are "operating in a manner similar to official media" (p. 158).

Unprofessionalism. Media in Nepal have suffered from various unprofessional practices including plagiarism, sensationalism, and misinformation (Acharya, 2005; KC, 2009; Media Foundation, 2012). For example, Anuja Baniya's case was highly publicized with regular follow-ups in April 2012. Baniya falsely claimed that she had returned 9.1 million Nepali rupees found on the bus to their rightful owner, and the media reported it as a true story, without proper verification (TKP, 2011). There are many other examples of falsified, distorted and sensationalized news reports that diminish media credibility in Nepal (Media Foundation 2012). Similarly, unauthorized (or plagiarized) content reuse from one media outlet to another is a common phenomenon in Nepali media (Acharya, 2005; KC, 2009; Kharel, 2006). For instance, local radio stations and television channels use newspaper or online media content without permission (sometimes without credit as well), and modify the content as if it were their own.

In addition, there are a number of issues that Nepali online media need to address in order to demonstrate respect for professional standards; these issues include hasty and unverified news breaks, biased or misleading presentation, use of secondary or anonymous sources, sponsored content, partisan influences, disclosing identities of victims of sex crimes, infringement of privacy and copyright, failure to admit mistakes, and removal of critical comments or opinions from news portals (Acharya, 2005; KC, 2009; Kharel, 2006; Media Foundation, 2012). Online journalist Ujjwal Acharya (2005) argues that online news portals are giving very little priority to

ethical considerations, and are "hampering the accuracy of the content due to overemphasis on speed and immediacy" (2005, p.4). Maher (2007) and Mythen (2010) believe that various unprofessional practices on digital platforms are mainly intended to encourage multiple clicks through the use of sensational or titillating content as a means of generating revenue (such as Google ads). Therefore, journalists and media institutions may not pay enough attention to upholding journalistic integrity and maintaining accountability on digital platforms.

Investment and sustainability. Investment and sustainability are two interrelated issues which can affect professional or qualitative performance in the media. Post-1990s political and legal reformations encouraged large-scale investment in the media and journalism sector (Kharel, 2006; Media Foundation, 2012; IMMN, 2008). However, Nepal has hundreds of newspapers and radio stations and dozens of television channels established without proper planning, investment, or potential income sources (Kharel, 2006; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). All these media outlets share the same inadequate market revenue, and, therefore, are inclined toward unhealthy competition (IMMN, 2008; UNESCO, 2013). As a consequence, media owners, in order to survive, are motivated to pursue unprofessional interests, such as maximizing personal gains and collecting market benefits by hook or by crook (KC, 2009). For these reasons, Mana Ranjan Josse, former editor-in-chief of *The Rising Nepal*, concludes that the quantitative growth of Nepali media is responsible for its low-quality content (Kharel, 2014).

International Media Mission to Nepal (IMMN, 2008; IFAMMN, 2012) points to the inequitable distribution of state advertising as a responsible cause to weaken small-scale media such as local newspapers and community radio stations. The government introduced a "one-window" advertising policy in 2006, which favoured state-funded media and deprived private-sector media outlets of public advertising funds (IMMN, 2008). In addition, high taxes on

newsprint and expensive postage rates also challenge the sustainability of print media outlets. International Media Mission identifies "unplanned and unmanaged development, [...] cut-throat competition, commercialization and politicization" as factors that contribute to the complexity of the sustainability issue (2008, p.18). Further, as a consequence of fierce market competition, salaries for journalists are low, and are not paid in a timely manner (IFAMMN, 2012).

Most of the news media have an Internet presence, but none of them have an online subscription model to help them sustain themselves financially (UNESCO, 2013).

Comparatively, online news portals seem inexpensive during the establishment phase, but during regular operations they suffer more with regard to collecting adequate revenue. On the one hand, the government has not yet provided public advertising funds to online media; on the other hand, the market has not yet trusted the digital platforms as a means of advertising their products and services (IFAMMN, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). Hence, revenue collection has become a significant challenge to the sustainability of online news portals.

Digital divide. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, only 3.33 percent of total households in Nepal have access to the Internet (CBS, 2012). However, these statistics comprise fixed (or wired) broadband lines only. The report of the National Telecommunications Authority (NTA) published in January 2014 indicates that Nepal's Internet penetration rate is 28.63 percent of the total population (NTA, 2014). This data includes all users of both fixed and wireless broadband services. Fixed broadband service includes cable Internet, ADSL, CDMA and cable modem, and wireless broadband service includes WiMAX and mobile phones. The use of online media content is made problematic due to routine power cuts (a nationwide problem, popularly known as "load-shedding"), typically for twelve hours a day. The above statistics are enough to allow the reader to imagine the true picture of the digital divide and Internet access in Nepal.

Most media companies, government departments, and private corporations have an Internet presence. As mentioned earlier, the majority of traditional media already replicate published/broadcast content on their digital platforms (Media Foundation, 2012). However, government agencies do not update their sites regularly, and official websites do not carry enough information (UNESCO, 2013). In addition, people in remote districts and rural areas cannot effectively use the Internet because it is very slow, ineffective and expensive (if available at all). Furthermore, the low rate of literacy, lack of technical knowledge, and unavailability of computers and electricity in those areas are other fundamental factors that prevent audiences from accessing online media (Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013).

Role of Press Council Nepal

Autonomous and independent media monitoring bodies such as press councils can play an important role in ensuring professionalism and accountability in media institutions. With this purpose in mind, Press Council Nepal (PCN) was established for the promotion of healthy journalism in Nepal. Articles 5, 7 and 12 of the Press Council Act, 1992, authorize PCN to recommend and enforce the code of ethics, monitor media outlets' and journalists' performance, and hear and settle complaints about abuses of press freedom (Press Council Act, 1992). PCN is also responsible for fostering cordial relations between the media and public agencies, and for maintaining public morality and the dignity of citizens. In cases of violations of the code of ethics, PCN has the right to ask for clarification letters, to play a mediating role between conflicting parties and to seek a solution; and if the clarification letter is ignored, PCN keeps the incident on record and publishes it in its annual report.

However, PCN cannot prosecute any person or institution responsible for ethics violations by filing a case in court. PCN also lacks an effective mechanism for monitoring media

performance throughout the country, as it is stationed in Kathmandu with limited human and infrastructural resources (KC, 2009; IMMN, 2008). An additional problem is that political media groups approach PCN and lobby it in order to defuse cases registered against their members (IFAMMN, 2012). Hence, the implementation status of the code of journalistic ethics is very superficial. When people feel victimized by media activities, they go directly to court to challenge the media outlet rather than going to PCN because of the growing ineffectiveness of the monitoring body (KC, 2009). Therefore, the International Media Mission noted that the PCN has been "unable to fulfill the role for lack of adequate legislation and capacity" (IMMN, 2008, p. 17).

The code of journalistic ethics of Nepali journalists was developed primarily for print journalists; later, in 2003, it was extended to regulate broadcast media. Article 2(a) of the most recent version (amended and revised in 2008) incorporates online media in a vague way, referring to "media of any nature or agency or organization producing and distributing news-oriented programs." Ujjwal Acharya (2005) and Bhuwan KC (2009) note that existing media ethics cannot address all the professional issues of online media, such as privacy, content alteration, copyright and advertising. Even though Press Council Nepal was established forty years ago, lack of adequate legislation, insufficient infrastructure, and a huge political influence on its structure have made the institution ineffective to work for the promotion of professional journalism and to make media institutions accountable to the public.

Conclusion

Nepal has a diverse media landscape in terms of quantitative growth and variety. Since the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, Nepal has made significant progress in the

media and communication sector (IFAMMN, 2012; IMMN, 2008; Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). The post-1990 political reforms, growing literacy rate, investment and market availability, and adoption of new media technologies are some of the key factors that have contributed to the growth of Nepali media outlets (Media Foundation, 2012, p.8). Nepal's constitutional and legal provisions are adequate to foster professionalism and media accountability in traditional media, but online media remain largely unaddressed (IFAMMN, 2012; IMMN, 2008).

However, throughout the period since the 1990s, Nepali media have been characterized by political influence and unprofessional practices, and have been challenged by a dearth of large-scale investment and sustainable resources, as well as by the digital divide. These characteristics and challenges are even more prevalent in online news media. Acharya (2005) believes that existing journalistic ethics are "not enough to guide" online media, and believes this situation may lead to compromises in journalistic integrity and may foster further increases in unprofessional practices. Similarly, the insufficient mandate of PCN for regulating online media may bring about serious consequences in regard to the quality of journalism and the upholding of media accountability.

The next chapter will present the findings of the research obtained from three different methods: a document review, semi-structured interviews, and archival records.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings obtained from three different methods that include a document review of twenty-five news stories, semi-structured interviews with ten online journalists, and archival records of five news stories, one from each of the five selected news portals. The findings of each method are presented in separate sections: Document review, Interview, and Archival records.

4.1 Document Review

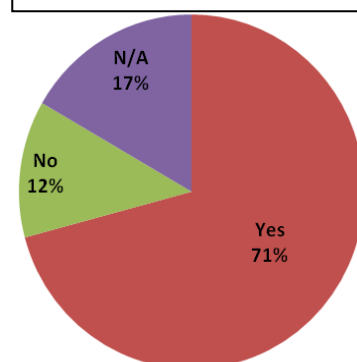
In this section the results of the document review are presented. Each of the twenty-five news stories (selected from five news portals, beginning at the top of each portal) was compared with two different external sources and analyzed based on accountability criteria drawn from CAJ ethical guidelines (CAJ, 2011) and the Code of Journalistic Ethics for the Nepali journalists (PCN, 2008). The seven criteria developed for assessing the accuracy and reliability of the news content are: (1) given information is truthful and reliable; (2) sources are quoted accurately and clearly mentioned; (3) reader's feedback and critical opinions are provided a platform; (4) advertisements are not presented as news; (5) errors are corrected and acknowledged; (6) news stories are archived for future reference; and (7) photos are credited and not altered. Some of the issues, which are hard to measure such as transparency and gatekeeping, have not been included due to the possible complication. In addition, the external information sources used as points of comparison represented mostly traditional news media portals that reported on the same issues on similar dates. See Appendix 2 for the list of twenty-five news stories that were reviewed and analyzed. The findings of the assessment according to these seven criteria are as follows:

Criterion 1: Given information is truthful and reliable.

More than two thirds (eighteen) of the twenty-five news stories were found to be accurate in terms of the names, numbers, places and incidents reported. However, two news stories (News 11 & 24) were actually press release-based news presented as original field stories, without citation of, or credit to, the original source.

Similarly, News 13 contained at least one factual error as well as an incorrect dateline (news from the Chitawan district was reported from Kathmandu, without citation of any news source in the field). In addition, external information sources were not found for four of the news stories (News 2, 16, 23, & 25) because the first two were based on expert interviews on contemporary issues, the third was a feature story, and the last was a filler story that none of the other portals reported. The news portals did not label these four news reports as features, interviews or opinion pieces, but instead mixed them in with their hard news sections. Overall, it was found that more than two thirds of the online news reports were accurate and reliable.

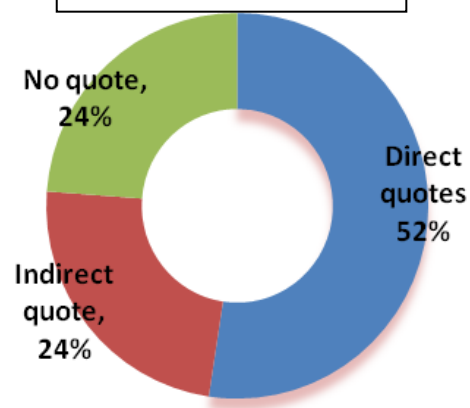
Figure 3: Criterion 1



Criterion 2: Sources are quoted accurately and

clearly mentioned. Eleven of the twenty-five news stories (News 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, & 23) incorporated quotes clearly and included direct quotes. Five of the news stories (News 4, 5, 19, 22, & 25) also mentioned news sources, but did not use direct quotes. In contrast, five other news reports (News 3, 6, 8, 13, & 18) mentioned no source, and narrated as if the reporters themselves saw or knew everything.

Figure 4: Criterion 2



Moreover, News 24, which presented press release-based information as the media outlet's own field report. Further, News 21 used three anonymous sources to support a political rumor.

Online news portals did not adequately mention bylines in the selected twenty-five news stories.

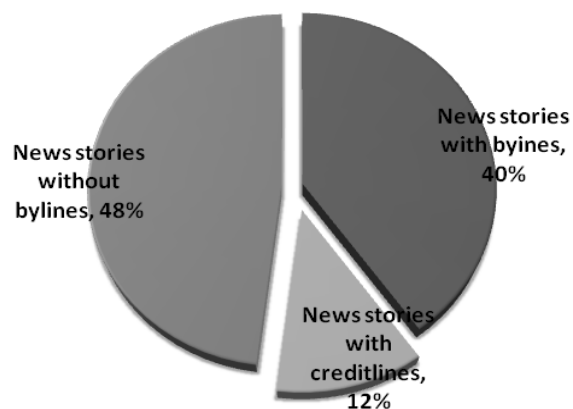
Only ten news stories (News 1, 6, 8, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20 & 23) included bylines, while three others (News 7, 9, & 17) provided institutional credit lines

and the remaining stories did not identify who

collected the stories from the field. Out of the five

selected news portals, *onlinekhabar.com* and *ujyaloonline.com* each reported four news stories without bylines, while *nagariknews.com* reported two stories, and *ekantipur.com* and *setopati.com* included one news story each without bylines

Figure 5: Criterion 2



Criterion 3: Reader's feedback and critical opinions are provided a platform.

Among twenty-five news stories, only eleven published audience comments, and most of these

comments were very short and non-critical.

For instance, News 16 had 14 comments,

News 11 had 6, News 17 had 4, News 22

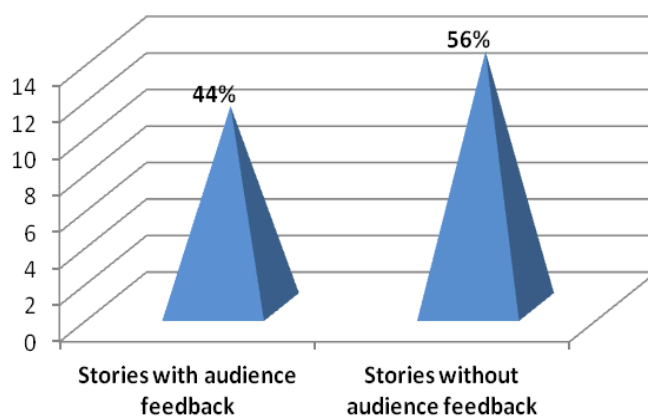
had 3, and seven other news stories

contained one comment each (News 6, 10,

14, 18, 20, 21, & 23). The remaining fourteen news stories did not publish any comments. In

addition, among the five top-viewed sites from which the stories were selected, only

Figure 6: Criterion 3

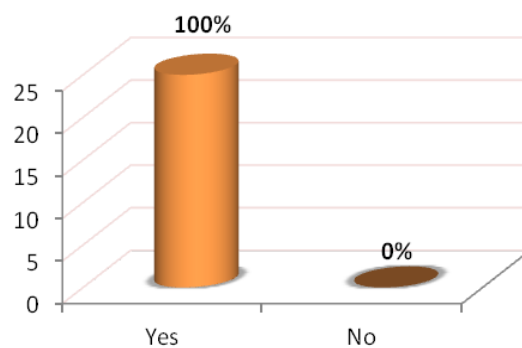


ekantipur.com has even a briefly stated policy regarding the publication of audience feedback. The single-sentence policy statement simply states that comments containing abusive words or slander shall not be published. The remaining sites do not contain any information to make audiences aware of the sites' policies regarding comments below published stories.

It was also found that news stories that were shared in social media outlets received more comments on social media than they did in the original news portals themselves. For instance, News 10 had no comments on the original site but had eighteen comments on the news portal's Facebook page. Similarly, News 21 received one comment on the original site, whereas three comments were received on Facebook. It was also observed that Facebook pages contained more critical comments than the original news portals, which were filled with positive, neutral, or less critical comments.

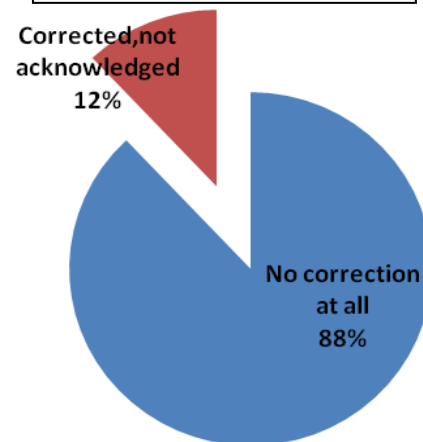
Criterion 4: Advertisements are not presented as news. The only unified finding of all twenty-five news stories is that advertisements were not found presented as news. Most of the news stories were related to political or government policies or actions, and were found to be genuinely reported. The rest of them were on socio-cultural issues that also did not reflect market interests. Further, none of the selected stories was labeled as "sponsored content" or "advertisement". However, it is observed that market-related issues were added in the middle of all five news portals' web pages, where the finance section began.

Figure 7: Criterion 4

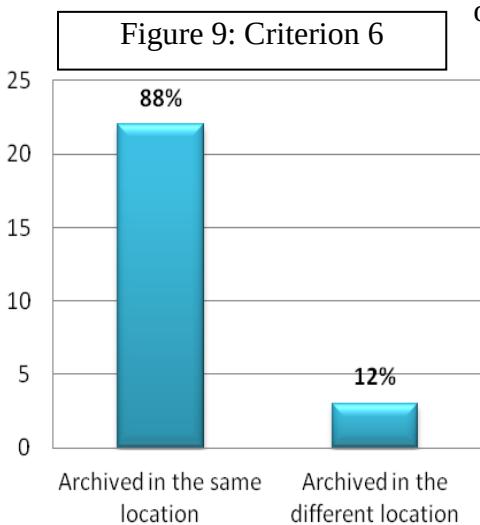


Criterion 5: Errors are corrected and acknowledged. The majority of the twenty-five stories were left uncorrected: they were found to be the same five months later as they had been on August 28, 2013, when they were originally published. However, three stories (News 3, 4 & 21) were significantly altered (modified and extended) without the inclusion of any information to that effect. To be specific, the sub-headline and the content were modified and extended in News 3, news content was fully changed and a photo added in News 4, and the headline and body text were slightly altered in News 21.

Figure 8: Criterion 5



Criterion 6: News stories are archived for future reference. Archiving news stories



on the Internet is also an indicator of accountability

because it helps audiences find past stories as well as comments about them. Archiving also allows for audiences to file grievances regarding those stories.

Fortunately, all twenty-five news stories were found archived in their respective news portals, though three of them (News 4, 5, & 12) were found in different locations than where they were first made available on

28 August, 2013.

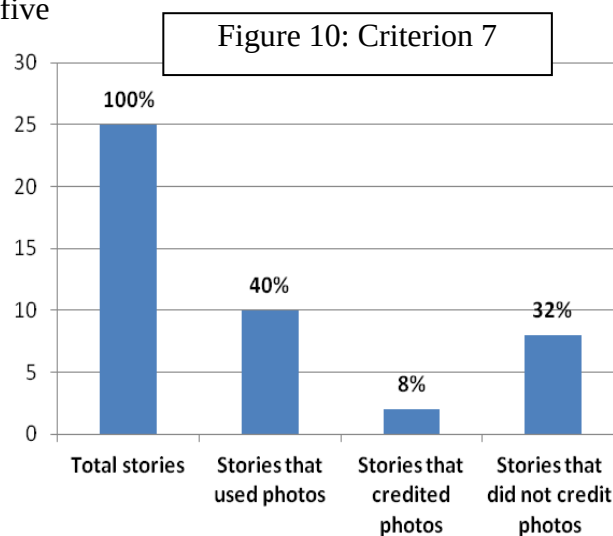
Though all of the news stories were archived, most of the news portals did not provide links to related, updated, or follow-up stories in the same news portals. For instance, the news

portals for News 12 ("protest program of 33-political party alliance"), News 17 ("CIAA warning to Airport authority"), and News 24 ("Adhikari couple's hunger strike") contained multiple (a dozen or so) related, developing stories, but the portals did not provide hyperlinks. Likewise, no hyperlinks to external sources were found at all.

Criterion 7: Photos are credited and not altered. One of the indicators of accountability is the fair use of photos, which should be obtained with permission and which should credit sources by naming the authors. Photo use was not found to be fair in this study, even though the majority of the twenty-five news stories did not use photos at all. Eight news stories (News 2, 4, 7, 10, 16, 17, 19, & 20) used photos without credit. As mentioned earlier, News 4 inserted a photo later -- without any acknowledgement of photo insertion. Only two news stories (News 18 & 23) credited photos properly.

In conclusion, the content of the twenty-five news stories, selected on a random date, have been reviewed and analyzed on the basis of CAJ (2011) ethics guidelines and PCN's Code of Journalistic Ethics in order to assess media accountability in the top-viewed news portals in Nepal. These findings present the practical performances of Nepali news portals with

regard to accountability to the public, and closely resemble the issues raised by the interview participants. The following section presents the findings of semi-structured interviews with ten online journalists in Nepal.



4.2 Semi-structured Interview

Three themes emerged from the interview findings on the basis of the research question and sub-questions. These themes combine responses from ten interview participants representing both editorial and reporting departments. The interviews were designed to investigate the perspectives on accountability to the professional and public stakeholders of ten journalists working in Nepal's five most-viewed online news portals.

This section explains these three themes and their subcategories. Direct quotes from interview participants have been selected from the interview transcripts, and are provided here as the most representative comments on each theme or subcategory. Interview participants for this research have been indicated by participant number, from 1 to 10 (e.g., Participant 5) in order to respect the confidentiality of the human subjects. See Appendix 3 for details on the interview participants.

Theme 1: Status of online media in Nepal. Interviewees expressed optimism regarding the potential for quality journalism in Nepal in the future, based on what they saw as a number of strengths. In response to a question about what major factors help make media more accountable to professional and public stakeholders in Nepal, the majority of study participants attested that journalists' educational backgrounds and individual commitment to the profession are among the most important (Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 & 10). For instance, participant 6 expressed hopes that educated, committed journalists in the newsroom would not compromise professional and ethical norms despite pressure from the market or from media owners themselves. However, participants indicated a number of trends in the Nepali media with regard to media accountability that are described below in different subcategories.

Subcategory 1: Conceptual understanding of accountability and professionalism.

Table 1: Conceptual understanding

Subcategory 1	Participant	Representative quotes
Conceptual understanding of accountability and professionalism	4	"media accountability is not an individual's responsibility; it is an outcome of team work. So accountability is a shared responsibility in an institutional setting"
	6	"professionalism begins with the journalists themselves"
	1	"strong and immediate in terms of their impact"
	10	"mainstream daily newspapers seem more ethical than other news media, including online. The reasons behind this can include a decades-long work tradition, a nationwide network of human resources, and large-scale investment"
Subcategory 3	2	"recruiting qualified human resources, increasing investment on infrastructure, and applying the code of ethics in everyday practices"
Participants' assessment of the accountability of traditional and online media	7	"any type of online outlet [associated or online-only] can be professional and accountable if they have a strong infrastructure, qualified human resources, and the willpower of the media promoters"
	8	"it cannot be said online as the main product is more accountable than the byproduct because most of the journalists working on any type of online outlet are from the same traditional media background"

All the interview participants interpreted "media accountability" as the responsibilities of media or journalists to society: for instance, media accountability is a form of social responsibility (Participant 3); it follows a code of ethics, international practice, and the law of the land (Participants 1 & 6); it encourages media outlets to take responsibility when there are factual errors (Participant 2); it encourages journalists to present media content in a proper way (Participant 6); and it "is not an individual's responsibility; it is an outcome of team work. So accountability is a shared responsibility in an institutional setting" (Participant 4, September 7, 2013). Even though participants expressed their inability or confusion when asked to define the term "accountability" in a theoretical way, each participant explained the term with a focus on different aspects of responsibility. One of the participants further explained the concept this way:

Basically, accountability is about who you are accountable to, what information you produce to disseminate, and what responsibility you take regarding the authenticity of the

given information. You should be held accountable if your information/report is erroneous, incorrect or against journalistic norms. (Participant 5, September 2, 2013)

Similarly, when asked about the concept of professionalism in journalism, participants 1, 6 and 10 explained that employing journalistic principles and values and a journalistic code of ethics, and remaining accountable for one's performance, constitutes professionalism for a journalist. Participant 7 believed that the professional performance of journalists should always be guided and monitored by their editorial supervisors. According to her, "if editorial supervisors are fully committed to journalistic values and guide reporters accordingly, the latter will demonstrate professional performance more seriously" (September 1, 2013). In contrast, participant 6 emphasized the role of the journalist him/herself, saying that "professionalism begins with the journalists themselves" (August 31, 2013). According to him, journalists should remain committed to journalistic values through their words and deeds; other factors should have only a secondary role.

In response to a query regarding whether online media are better than their traditional counterparts with regard to maintaining media accountability, the study participants expressed a variety of perspectives. A majority argued that traditional media outlets are better at maintaining accountability because they have long experience and possess sufficient resources such as an established infrastructure and networks of qualified journalists (Participants 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 & 10). Participants 4 and 10 specifically referred to print media as the most accountable and ethical news media, particularly the broadsheet daily newspapers with national circulation:

Mainstream daily newspapers seem more ethical than other news media, including online. The reasons behind this can include a decades-long work tradition, a nationwide network of human resources, and large-scale investment. In Nepal, local radio stations came into existence 15 years before, private television channels were introduced around 10 years or

more, and online media outlets are newer than any other news media.
(Participant 10, September 3, 2013)

In addition, participants 9 and 10 assumed that because most online media outlets have only small-scale investment, their access to resources is limited and therefore they might compromise on journalistic integrity when collecting information and publishing news. Similarly, participants 3 and 4 argued that online media are in transition because they are still considered alternative media, and that they can be less accountable to the professional stakeholders because they rely heavily on information already available in traditional media.

However, interview participants affiliated with online-only media (Participants 1, 2, 7 & 8) maintained that online news portals have multiple advantages such as unlimited space, the capacity for immediate information updates, direct interaction with audiences, and global accessibility and transparency, all of which, according to them, can help uphold journalistic values and promote accountability. Participant 1 considered online portals to be "strong and immediate in terms of their impact," but stated that they lagged behind in following the code of ethics and in maintaining accountability (September 4, 2013). Participant 7 argued that online media are far ahead with regard to upholding journalistic values and maintaining accountability because "traditional media are very slow" (September 1, 2013), and it is therefore more difficult for them to respond to public grievances and generate dialogue. Considering online media to be more effective due to their wider reach, she said that traditional media houses are launching online news portals and making themselves globally accessible. According to two other participants, this trend indicates that online outlets will be better media in the future, if not at present (Participants 7 & 9).

When asked for the better online news portals (associated with traditional news media, or online-only news portals) with regard to media accountability towards the professional and public stakeholders, interview participants favored the news portals they were affiliated with. For instance, the six participants working for associated news portals asserted that online outlets run by traditional media are more professional than online-only news portals relating to quality content and public accountability. Four of them argued that associated news portals can take advantage of infrastructure established for traditional media, can collect and verify information through a network of journalists across the country, and are expected to follow the systematic gatekeeping mechanisms already practiced in their parent media (Participants 3, 4, 6 & 9). Three participants alleged that online-only news portals, in contrast, usually depend on secondary sources for the collection of information, and rewrite news reports as if they were their own, owing to inadequate infrastructure and a limited number of journalists (Participants 3, 6 & 9).

Participants working for online-only news portals believed that both types of online news portals have strengths and weaknesses of their own. Participant 2 explained that top-viewed online-only news portals have been doing better by "recruiting qualified human resources, increasing investment on infrastructure, and applying the code of ethics in everyday practices" (September 8, 2013). Moreover, participant 7 rejected the idea that there was one better type of online news portal, arguing that "any type of online outlet [associated or online-only] can be professional and accountable if they have a strong infrastructure, qualified human resources, and the willpower of the media promoters" (September 1, 2013). Participant 8 expressed a similar opinion:

Traditional media are running online outlet as a byproduct, whereas some online media outlets are running as the main product. However, it cannot be said online

as the main product is more accountable than the byproduct because most of the journalists working on any type of online outlet are from the same traditional media background. It solely depends upon the resources available and the professional commitments of the journalists working there. (September 5, 2013)

Even though most of the participants (those affiliated with associated news portals) considered online news portals parented by traditional media to be more accountable to public and professional stakeholders, those affiliated with online-only news portals believed that any media can be accountable to the public and professional stakeholders if they have strong infrastructure, committed and qualified human resources and commitment of the leadership.

The interview participants' understanding about the concept of media accountability to public and professional stakeholders is theoretically good enough. However, their everyday practices are something different. For instance, despite theoretical emphasis, public grievances are not valued equally and answered well.

Subcategory 2: Public grievances are not handled properly.

Table 2: Handling public grievances

Subcategory 2	Participant	Representative quotes
Public grievances are not handled properly.	4	"in case of the difficult situation of handling grievances from the public, we have to face the public, interact with them, and convince them of the good intentions of the newsroom"
	6	"media can provide a space/opportunity to express public concerns in case of a grievance or a different opinion"
	8	"you have to admit that you cannot be 100 percent accurate of your information, and the news you send cannot be 100 percent true because we do not work in a perfect world"
	1	"we usually do not ignore or delete public grievances unless they are deceitful, obscene, or defamatory, deliberately targeting any person or institution"
	3	"audience interest or grievances should be handled within the scope of journalistic values and the code of ethics. Audiences are not experts on all issues, so they should not be always decisive"
	6	"have you ever seen any media criticism against the Chaudhari Group? Of course not. It is because of advertisements"
	9	"in traditional media, audience feedback is in editorial control, but online it is just the opposite"

Interview participants described their media institutions' practices for handling grievances. Participant 4 suggested, "In case of the difficult situation of handling grievances from the public, we have to face the public, interact with them, and convince them of the good intentions of the newsroom" (September 7, 2013). Likewise, participant 6 described the grievance handling strategy as follows:

[In a] dispute about a news story, the editorial team must be active in resolving the dispute. Through interaction with the editorial team and explanations of the professional norms of journalism, the audience can be convinced about the veracity of disputed content. In addition, media can provide a space/opportunity to express public concerns in case of a grievance or a different opinion. (August 31, 2013)

In response to a query about how a journalist or a media house should respond to the public in a confrontation regarding news content, participant 8 suggested facing the audience directly:

This is very simple. You have to listen to them with the humility that you might have made a mistake. You have to admit that you cannot be 100 percent accurate of your information, and the news you send cannot be 100 percent true because we do not work in a perfect world. Your editorial team is not perfect, nor is your editor. So, you have to admit everyday that you are liable to make mistakes. (September 5, 2013)

However, a couple of the interview participants indicated that not all grievances that come from audiences are legitimate. Participants 5 and 10 argued that all audiences may not be capable of deciding what content is best suited to them, and that many audience grievances reflect biases due to political, cultural, ethnic or other preferences. Regarding his institution's media policy, participant 1 said, "We usually do not ignore or delete public grievances unless they are deceitful, obscene, or defamatory, deliberately targeting any person or institution"

(September 4, 2013). For his part, participant 3 pointed out that handling grievances should not undermine journalistic values:

Many people say that audience interest is the principal motive for a working journalist or a particular media house. However, for me, audience interest or grievances should be handled within the scope of journalistic values and the code of ethics. Audiences are not experts on all issues, so they should not be always decisive. (September 2, 2013)

Another trend related to audience grievances, according to participants 5 and 6, is that many small-scale news portals hide detailed contact information from their web pages to avoid criticism and direct confrontation with the public. Detailed contact information may include office addresses, postal codes, telephone/ fax numbers, information about editors and reporters, and email addresses.

Half of the study participants (Participants 1, 5, 6, 9, & 10) observed that small-scale news portals, which, they argued, often publish sensational, baseless and prejudiced content, use this strategy of information hiding and provide only email or a feedback template. Participants 1 and 6 argued that this lack of contact information on digital platforms makes online journalists non-interactive, and allows for unprofessional practices such as the publication of disputed content and defamatory materials. Participant 9 hoped that the online portal registration system at PCN can resolve this problem, and that if there is a strong penalty system for such media outlets and journalists, such bad practices can be brought to an end in the future.

Interview participants expressed their belief that responding to audience feedback in an appropriate manner is one of the indicators of media accountability. Three of the participants asserted that media houses have been unfair when responding to or publishing audience comments, despite their feedback-receiving policies (Participants 1, 5 & 9). These participants argued that media houses usually publish supportive or less critical comments and ignore

opinions that displease the media promoters and advertisers. Participant 6 asked, "Have you ever seen any media criticism against the *Chaudhari Group* [an industrial group in Nepal]? Of course not. It is because of advertisements" (August 31, 2013).

All of the study participants asserted that their media houses had policies (written or unwritten) for receiving and editing feedback in order to foster media accountability. Four participants maintained that media institutions can promote quality journalism by employing a feedback-receiving policy, which guides journalists to filter obscene language, defamatory content, and biased allegations before publishing audience feedback (Participants 1, 3, 5 & 7). Participant 3 further speculated, "Online media can have more feedback responses because they are interactive and immediate, and they can therefore be expected to be more accountable" to the public (September 2, 2013). However, participant 9 warned that, "in traditional media, audience feedback is in editorial control, but online it is just the opposite" (September 1, 2013). Overall, the participants indicated that their media institutions lack specific policies for handling grievances, and noted a trend of avoiding critical feedback in different ways.

Subcategory 3: Market dominates accountability.

Table 3: Market dominates media accountability

Subcategory 3	Participant	Representative quotes
Market dominates accountability	1	"the market directly benefits media outlets"
	6	"market domination is a global phenomenon"
	4	"audience is important", but pointed out that "a professional journalist cannot fulfill audience demands that are in conflict with ethical values"
	10	"newspapers were published as political mouthpieces in the past, but today, online news portals have replaced them"
	5	"the professional frame should prevail over other frames of accountability. For me, other factors have a secondary role only. Those who compromise professional integrity and ethical values cannot be professional journalists"

Most of the interview participants agreed that all other stakeholders of accountability have theoretical influence on media accountability practices, but that the market practically dominates media outlets because of the issue of sustainability. Participants put forward a number of reasons to support this argument, such as "the market directly benefits media outlets" (Participant 1, September 4, 2013), "market domination is a global phenomenon" (Participant 6, August 31, 2013), and "media owners are more interested in revenue collection than content quality" (Participant 7, September 1, 2013). Participants 1, 5 and 7 stated that media owners constantly think of potential sources of revenue, and that journalists are thereby bound to compromise professional values. Regarding the interest of media owners, participant 5 observed,

As a working journalist, if I do not respect the interests of the media owners, I will be immediately kicked out of the job, and the next job is not easily available. Because of this limitation, I am bound to compromise journalistic integrity and ethical values to safeguard owners' interests, as well as market interests. (September 2, 2013)

Moreover, according to participant 6, advertisements and sponsorships are used as weapons to restrict media criticism. Participant 1 further observed that when news stories are selected or rejected based on the market's interest in them, the market frame becomes dominant. Participant 5 maintained, "A corporate institution does not invest a huge sum of money [on media infrastructure and regular operation] just to serve the social responsibility theory of the press, but to make more money" (September 2, 2013). Furthermore, according to participant 7, the market can delay, distort or even kill news that runs against the interests of market stakeholders, such as advertisers, sponsors or donors.

A majority of the interview participants considered that political stakeholder is the second most dominant stakeholder of accountability after the market stakeholder. Participants 7 and 8

contended that political polarization in Nepali media has increased the influence of politics in content selection and presentation. For his part, participant 10 observed a transition in political influence from traditional media to online media, arguing that "newspapers were published as political mouthpieces in the past, but today, online news portals have replaced them" (September 3, 2013).

Even though the market stakeholder practically dominates media accountability in Nepal, a number of participants pointed toward the audience as the most important stakeholder of media accountability (Participants 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 & 9). These participants presented theoretical reasons to support why they thought online media ought to be more accountable to their audiences. Interview participants, however, stated that this hoped-for emphasis on accountability to the audience has not been properly implemented because focusing on the audience does not directly benefit media outlets like focusing on the market and political stakeholders does. Four of the study participants asserted that professional and audience stakeholders of accountability should be considered together, with professional standards guiding the practice of accountability to audiences (1, 4, 5 & 9). For instance, participant 4 stated that the "audience is important," but pointed out that "a professional journalist cannot fulfill audience demands that are in conflict with ethical values" (September 7, 2013). Likewise, participant 5 stressed that professional accountability should be supreme in all types of media, including online:

The professional frame should prevail over other frames of accountability. For me, other factors have a secondary role only. Those who compromise professional integrity and ethical values cannot be professional journalists. Journalists need to use their conscience and their expertise of journalistic values and the code of ethics to decide what sort of content is socially digestible, and how much can be served for a healthy society. (September 2, 2013)

To sum up this theme, a majority of the interview participants thought that traditional media and the news portals associated with them were performing better than online news portals in terms of professional practices and media accountability. Similarly, the participants argued that most media, including online, have been dominated by market interests because the issue of sustainability is fundamental. The following theme will present the participants' observations on current challenges to online media accountability in Nepal.

Theme 2: Challenges for ensuring accountability on digital platforms. This theme focuses on the key challenges of ensuring accountability in journalism on digital platforms in Nepal. Participants identified a number of issues prevalent in online news portals in Nepal, including newness and recognition, diminishing the significance of gatekeeping, inadequate investment and the question of sustainability, and the limited scope of the code of ethics.

Subcategory 1: Problems due to newness and recognition.

Table 4: Problems related to newness and recognition

Subcategory 1	Participant	Representative quotes
Problems due to newness and recognition.	6	"online journalism in Nepal has passed one decade but it has not yet produced a generation of its own"
	3	"when amateurs and technocrats dominate, online media can deviate from the professional track. I think quality content is possible only through qualified journalists [...] If we want to develop a professional and accountable online media, we have to educate and train these amateurs on journalistic values and ethics"
	7	"the entire world is learning online journalism by practice, not only Nepal,"
	1	"today this is not the case online journalists are not yet eligible to be nominated as PCN board members"

Several study participants (3, 5, 6 & 9) agreed that many journalists involved in online journalism are in an experiential learning phase. They argued that various unprofessional and unaccountable activities on digital platforms have occurred because of the influence of technocrats and amateurs who have technical skills but lack professional knowledge. Post-

publication correction and verification practices have been growing because of the technically oriented and amateur people in this field, according to participant 3. Moreover, participant 9 stated that most associated online portals reproduce traditional media content to make journalism online, but are not really contributing to the enhancement of online journalism. Participant 6 stated that "online journalism in Nepal has passed one decade but it has not yet produced a generation of its own" (August 31, 2013). He elaborated, stating that whoever is working as an online journalist has come to it from traditional media outlets. Similarly, participant 3 said that many amateurs and technocrats have been attracted to the digital platform because it is easy, cheap and widely accessible. He further warns,

[W]hen amateurs and technocrats dominate, online media can deviate from the professional track. I think quality content is possible only through qualified journalists [...] If we want to develop a professional and accountable online media, we have to educate and train these amateurs on journalistic values and ethics. (September 2, 2013)

Moreover, "The entire world is learning online journalism by practice, not only Nepal," asserted participant 7 (September 1, 2013). She explained that unhealthy practices can be a common feature in any media suffering through the stage of experiential learning.

On the contrary, four study participants also argued for the importance of official recognition of online media (Participants 1, 3, 5 & 9). They expressed their view that, in comparison to traditional media, online media have not been recognized by government agencies. Participant 1 shared an experience involving the Department of Information, a government agency which denied press passes to online media a few years before. "Today this is not the case", he added, but then went on to note that "online journalists are not yet eligible to be nominated as PCN board members" (September 4, 2013). Two interview participants complained that online media outlets are deprived of the welfare advertisement fund, which the Government

of Nepal has been providing for newspapers and radio stations to support their professional growth (Participants 1 & 3). The Government of Nepal, participant 3 maintained, should work toward recognition of online media and develop them as mainstream media by providing the necessary privileges and opportunities.

Subcategory 2: Diminishing significance of gatekeeping.

Table 5: Significance of gatekeeping mechanism

Subcategory 2	Participant	Representative quotes
Diminishing significance of gatekeeping	6	"Kantipur Daily, the so-called largest circulating newspaper in Nepal, never published an apology when there was a scoop news report about "super-rich" Rasendra Bhattarai that turned out to be a fiasco"
	10	"an online journalist has to think well before about the content to be published"
	1	publishing a false report deliberately for personal gain is "terrible"
	4	"unhealthy competition among media outlets to break information based on raw data"

Five of the participants indicated that unhealthy competition for breaking news is another serious problem, more dominant in broadcast and online media than in print journalism (Participants 1, 2, 4, 6 & 10). As a consequence of hasty news breaks, they argued, the gatekeeping function of journalism is losing its significance, particularly in online media, in which gatekeeping is almost nonexistent. Participant 4 stated that journalists strive to be the first among competing media to announce a news report based on raw data, rather than properly verifying information for accuracy and credibility. Two of the participants indicated that most of the feedback responses from audiences are related to factual errors, and that this trend is increasing (Participants 3 & 10). Two other participants thought that a lack of strong gatekeeping mechanisms in online news portals is responsible for hurried news breaks with multiple errors (Participants 6 & 8). Moreover, participant 8 stated that copying information from other sources without properly verifying it is one of the major causes of publishing errors in online news portals. One of the interview participants shared an incident regarding news breaks:

Kantipur Daily, the so-called largest circulating newspaper in Nepal, never published an apology when there was a scoop news report about "super-rich" Rasendra Bhattarai that turned out to be a fiasco. Similarly, *Nagarik Daily* published a series of deliberate news reports on Bhaktaman's abduction and Khila Nath Dhakal's assault cases, but it never published an apology for the widely understood propaganda campaign. (Participant 6, August 31, 2013)

Publishing a false report deliberately for personal gain is "terrible," participant 1 said (September 4, 2013). Additionally, participants 5 and 10 alleged that many Nepali journalists express professional commitments in public, but compromise their commitments for personal benefit in private. This is a violation of the code of ethics, the participants argued.

As a consequence of a culture of speedy news updates, four of the participants observed, the majority of local radio stations, community newspapers, television channels, and online news portals across the country are largely dependent on unauthorized or plagiarized content from different sources (Participants 1, 3, 5, 8 & 10). According to these participants, both the traditional and online news media obtain news stories from rival media and often adapt them as their own. Interview participants contended that hasty news breaks and unhealthy competition are responsible for the increasing trends of post-publication correction and post deletion (Participants 4 & 10). "An online journalist has to think well before about the content to be published," asserted participant 10 (September 3, 2013).

Therefore, participant 9 suggested, every media outlet should develop and follow a standard procedure for information collection and verification; this, he believed, could diminish post-publication correction and post deletion. Some participants related the diminished gatekeeping system of most of the online news portals to the investment and sustainability issue, which is discussed in subcategory 3 of this theme (Participants 1, 3, 5, 6 & 9). They argued that most of the online media are not successful in attracting large-scale investment and enough

advertisement to support operational costs. Therefore, a limited number of people are carrying multiple responsibilities, resulting in poor gatekeeping in online media.

Subcategory 3: Issues of investment and sustainability.

Table 6: Investment and sustainability related issues

Subcategory 3	Participant	Representative quotes
Issues of investment and sustainability.	6	"Small-scale investment in media outlets has increased dependency on secondary sources" "launching an online medium per se is not important, but sustainability is — how much one can invest to run online and how long the portal can survive"
	8	"online media hardly draws revenue universally"
	3	"a professional online media outlet needs almost all the equipment of traditional media except a broadcasting station and printing press"

Several participants expressed their concerns about the issues of investment and sustainability as a major challenge for online media to maintain accountability to the public. Five participants observed that in Nepal, online media are, as of yet, unable to attract large-scale investment like print and broadcast media with national circulation or coverage can (Participants 1, 3, 5, 6 & 9). Participant 6 maintained, "Small-scale investment in media outlets has increased dependency on secondary sources" because an individual media outlet cannot afford to establish its own network of sources to collect and verify information (August 31, 2013).

Most news portals in Nepal have been established with limited investment for experimental observation, according to participants 4, 6, 8 and 9. Participants 4, 8 and 9 stated that, for one thing, media investors are not confident enough to make a huge investment, and that, for another, advertisers are not confident about the effectiveness of online media as new media, and are still hesitant to use online portals for the promotion of their services and products. As a consequence, said participants 6 and 9, small-scale investment affects the strength of infrastructure and human resources, and unprofessional practices therefore become obvious in online media. In addition, a number of interview participants asserted that it is very hard to

sustain online media using revenue generated from the market, even though the scope of online media is growing. Participant 8 stated that "online media hardly draws revenue universally" (September 5, 2013). Participant 6 maintained that "launching an online medium *per se* is not important, but sustainability is — how much one can invest to run online and how long the portal can survive" (August 31, 2013).

Large-scale investment and adequate market support are the keys to sustaining online news portals in a professional and accountable manner, said participants 3, 8 and 9. Though online news portals are considered less expensive, participant 3 argued, they are not as cheap as assumed because "a professional online media outlet needs almost all the equipment of traditional media except a broadcasting station and printing press" (September 2, 2013). Reflecting on the challenges of gathering sufficient revenue to support such expenses, participant 6 argued that "when an online journalist cannot see a portal as sustainable, one may do anything [i.e., unethical practices] to survive, disregarding media professionalism" (August 31, 2013). He further questioned the undisclosed sources of the online-only news portals. Participant 8 similarly warned that when there is not enough revenue coming in from the market, media begin to compromise journalistic integrity to attract advertisement or financial support. However, explaining his own news portal's financial situation, he also shared his experience of trying to maintain journalistic integrity:

Since there is no sponsorship and grants, we are putting our own money to run this [Setopati.com] media. How long we can run, I cannot say. The biggest challenge for us today is whether or not we can translate our credibility into generating online revenue. (September 5, 2013)

Overall, the participants expressed their concerns about the sustainability of online news portals given that the market is not confident enough to advertise their services and products

through them. As a consequence, participants see various unprofessional practices (such as plagiarism, content moderation, and use of secondary sources in news reports) arising as a means of gathering revenue to cover operational costs.

Subcategory 4: Inadequate code of ethics.

Table 7: Inadequate code of ethics

Subcategory 4	Participant	Representative quotes
Inadequate code of ethics.	9	"Online media have unique features that distinguish them from traditional media; therefore, the existing code of ethics is insufficient for professional practice"
	7	"A news medium does not make a fundamental difference to a committed journalist in employing journalistic values, following the code of ethics, and ensuring media accountability"
	5	"If journalists are really committed to professional norms and ethical values, the existing code of ethics is sufficient to address the issues of accountability "
	1	"In June 2013, <i>onlinekhabar.com</i> published an interview with Malvika Subba, a popular actress in Nepal. After a few days, she asked us to withdraw the interview because audiences reacted very critically against her point of view, and she felt remorse about what she said."
	8	"copying others' creations without permission is plagiarism and is against the law of the land"

Most of the study participants assumed that the existing code of ethics is prepared for traditional media, and does not cover the ethical challenges (such as post-publication correction, post deletion, online archiving of disputed content, and crowdsourcing of information) encountered on digital platforms. Participant 9 observed that "online media have unique features that distinguish them from traditional media; therefore, the existing code of ethics is insufficient for professional practice" (September 1, 2013). Participant 5 referred to the post deletion issue (removing published content from digital platforms) as an example of a problem not clearly addressed in the existing media policy or the code of ethics. Participant 1 shared an experience related to post deletion on the grounds of source remorse:

In June 2013, *onlinekhabar.com* published an interview with Malvika Subba, a popular actress in Nepal. After a few days, she asked us to withdraw the interview because audiences reacted very critically against her point of view, and she felt remorse about what she said. (September 4, 2013)

Four of the participants also shared similar incidents of removing published posts from news portals on various grounds (Participants 3, 5, 6 & 10). Participant 6 asserted that pressure from advertisers is very dominant in all media houses in Nepal, and that they might therefore remove information that runs counter to advertisers' interests, such as critical stories about their products or services. Politicians and other actors also create pressures to remove content that is against their interests, participants 3 and 5 said. However, participants 2, 5 and 10 indicated a couple of internal causes that they believed are also responsible for the removal of content from digital platforms. For instance, they noted that online media institutions themselves remove outdated or less relevant content owing to the limited space available in digital archives, and that some stories also disappear without public notice in order to safeguard media owners' interests.

However, opposing the idea that current codes of ethics are inadequate to guide accountability practices in online media, participant 7 contended that if a journalist can practice ethically in a newspaper, in the same way he/she can practice ethically on a digital platform. She further argued, "A news medium does not make a fundamental difference to a committed journalist in employing journalistic values, following the code of ethics, and ensuring media accountability" (September 1, 2013). For her, speedy news breaks are the only challenge to online media distinct from those faced by their traditional counterparts. Participants 6 and 10 had a similar perspective, noting that the existing code of ethics covers most aspects of online journalism, missing only certain technical aspects such as post deletion, post-publication correction, crowdsourcing, and online archiving of disputed information. Participant 5 also concurs, arguing, "If journalists are really committed to professional norms and ethical values,

the existing code of ethics is sufficient to address the issues of accountability of any media" (September 2, 2013).

Interview participants also raised the issue of plagiarism on digital platforms where it is easy to collect, select and repurpose information without the permission of the creators (Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 & 10). Participant 8 asserted that "copying others' creations without permission is plagiarism and is against the law of the land" (September 5, 2013). Participant 5 observed that the most responsible cause is the inefficiency of legal remedies, which are "expensive, slow and ineffective" (September 2, 2013). PCN is the legally mandated body responsible for monitoring professional practices of media outlets in Nepal, but there are no specific ethical guidelines to regulate the online news portals, observed participants 1, 2 and 5. To sum up, interview participants observed that there are multiple issues that result from an insufficient code of ethics, including deletion of published posts on various grounds, a growing tendency toward post-publication correction due to hasty news breaks, and increased plagiarism due to the ease of copying and pasting information on digital platforms.

Finally, participants identified various issues that have challenged the professional and accountable growth of online news portals in Nepal, such as the newness of the medium, issues of investment and sustainability, and inadequate codes of ethics to regulate online news portals. Participants asserted that without resolving these challenges, online news portals cannot be properly accountable to public and to professional stakeholders. The next theme, therefore, will present the potential factors, suggested by the interview participants, to make online media accountable by overcoming afore-mentioned challenges.

Theme 3: Factors in making media accountable. This theme assesses the participants' perspectives on factors in making online news media accountable to their audiences. It considers some potential areas (such as the proactive role of the audience, the impact of the digital divide and media literacy, and the role of monitoring bodies) of improvement that participants believe could help ensure professional values and respect for audience interests.

Subcategory 1: The proactive role of the audience.

Table 8: Proactive role of audience

Subcategory 1	Participant	Representative quotes
The proactive role of the audience.	5	"we publish information based on our sources and use one angle to write news content. As we publish it, other people who already know about the issue start feeding us with updated information and news angles. Then we verify the information through crowd sourcing and publish the updates. Hence, news making becomes a continuous and a collaborative process. The more we do it, the better news item we may have"
	4	"regular and interactive relationship between journalists and audiences can make media more interactive, participatory and accountable"
	9	"lead to negative consequences and spoil hard-earned credibility"

All the study participants asserted that audiences can play a significant role in the news-making process in two ways: first, audiences provide information, and, next, they assist in information verification, helping determine whether the published news is accurate, balanced, credible, error-free, and ethically sound. Participant 5 noted that journalists are crowdsourcing to gather information through various online and social media outlets. He further elaborated, describing the practice of crowdsourcing in the newsroom to verify information and make the news more mature:

These days, we publish information based on our sources and use one angle to write news content. As we publish it, other people who already know about the issue start feeding us with updated information and news angles. Then we verify the information through crowd sourcing and publish the updates. Hence, news making becomes a continuous and a collaborative process. The more we do it, the better news item we may have. (September 2, 2013)

Some participants were very optimistic about the role of the audience, believing that the number of media-literate people in Nepal is growing (Participants 1, 2, 8 & 10). According to them, media literacy widens people's knowledge, increasing their ability to recognize the media's professional obligations and responsibility to the public; therefore, the public can play the role of a pressure group. Participant 4 hoped that a "regular and interactive relationship between journalists and audiences can make media more interactive, participatory and accountable" (September 7, 2013).

Participants 1, 9 and 10 pointed out two basic challenges to empowering audiences to make media accountable to public and professional stakeholders: first, the digital divide has prevented a huge segment of the Nepali public from accessing online content, and, as a consequence, cannot monitor media to make them accountable to the public. Participant 9 further warned that feedback received from the media-illiterate audience can "lead to negative consequences and spoil hard-earned credibility" (September 1, 2013). Therefore, participants 9 and 10 suggested that without having media literacy and digital access, a wide sphere of the rural public in Nepal cannot play a significant role in making media accountable to public and professional stakeholders.

Subcategory 2: Reducing the digital divide.

Table 9: Reduction of the digital divide

Subcategory 2	Participant	Representative quotes
Reducing the digital divide.	1	"a large segment of the audience will monitor, question and criticize news portals when the latter deviates from the professional track"
	2	"journalists and media institutions face more pressures to follow the code of ethics and to be accountable to the public"
	5	"online portals will be more participatory and democratic"
	6	"the audience can interact directly with journalists in the newsroom about issues of public concern"

With regard to online media accountability, participants considered the digital divide to be a big challenge in a country where only one fourth of the population can access the Internet. All of the participants unanimously agreed that, if the digital divide decreases, audiences can access online media content and can create pressure on media institutions as well as on journalists to be accountable to public and professional stakeholders. Moreover, participants presented a number of arguments to support the opinion that a reduced digital divide can enhance media accountability on digital platforms. Participant 1 stated that "a large segment of the audience will monitor, question and criticize news portals when the latter deviates from the professional track" (September 1, 2013); participant 2 said that "journalists and media institutions face more pressures to follow the code of ethics and to be accountable to the public" (September 8, 2013); participant 5 hoped that "online portals will be more participatory and democratic" (September 2, 2013); participant 6 observed that "the audience can interact directly with journalists in the newsroom about issues of public concern" (August 31, 2013); participant 7 noted that "more citizen journalists can be produced who can contribute media content" (September 1, 2013); participant 8 argued that "online media will have more eyes to judge the quality of news content" (September 5, 2013); participant 9 hoped that "media monopoly and news propaganda will be lessened" (September 1, 2013); and participant 10 anticipated that "more issues about marginalized people will be covered" (September 3, 2013).

Discussing the impact of the digital divide, participant 1 stated that online media in Nepal have been focusing on urban audiences as well as Nepal people living abroad. Owing to the significant gap created by the digital divide, participants 1 and 6 observed that rural people and issues are ignored or sidelined, and the issues of people with digital access have been overemphasized. Moreover, when the digital divide decreases, participants 6 and 7 anticipated, a

large community can approach online media and set new priorities in content selection.

Participant 6 further elaborated, "There will be a paradigm shift in content selection. Today, we are highlighting migrant workers and remittance related issues; tomorrow, we will be discussing agriculture, local technology, and environmental issues" (August 31, 2013). However, participants 1, 3 and 6 argued that increased size of online audiences is not sufficient to ensure quality participation without increasing media literacy that sensitizes audience about journalistic values and professional responsibilities.

Subcategory 3: Increasing media literacy.

Table 10: Increasing media literacy

Subcategory 3	Participant	Representative quotes
Increasing media literacy.	3	"citizen journalists" can play a "proactive role in making media accountable"
	1	"when people are aware of the code of ethics of journalists, they can create pressure"
	6	Online media should be more careful about professional and accountability issues because of the audience. They are not merely consumers but active media monitors.

In response to a query into whether or not media literacy can positively influence online media accountability, a majority of the study participants fully agreed with the need for media literacy for all types of media audiences (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9 & 10). Participant 4 argued that media literacy should take primacy over the digital divide because literacy makes audiences active and responsible. Media education, according to participant 7, can facilitate audience understanding of the actual role of media, its responsibility to society, journalists' professional practices, and the code of ethics.

Interview participants pointed out various aspects of the importance of media literacy. Participants 1, 6 and 9 hoped that media literacy can empower readers, and that they can therefore perform the role of watchdog of the watchdogs. Participant 3 observed that media

literacy transforms the general public into "citizen journalists" who can play a "proactive role in making media accountable" (September 2, 2013). Also, it can sensitize audiences to their rights and journalists' duties through the latter's professional performance, according to participants 1 and 2. Participant 1 argued that "when people are aware of the code of ethics of journalists, they can create pressure" on media and journalists to be accountable to the professional and public stakeholders (September 4, 2013). Participant 6 elaborated:

Online media should be more careful about professional and accountability issues because of the audience. They are not merely consumers but active media monitors. In addition, they write us comments pointing out errors, reporting biases and unbalanced presentation in our stories with reference to the journalists' code of ethics. That obviously creates pressure on us [both journalists and media] working there to remain accountable. If we do not improve, audiences will leave us and catch another. In media terms, losing the audience means dying. (August 31, 2013)

However, three of the participants argued that even though media literacy is important, it is not enough to ensure media accountability because media literacy is required for other stakeholders as well, such as media promoters (Participants 5, 6 & 8). Participant 8 contended that in addition to audiences and the technical personnel of media houses, members of the media management team also need media literacy trainings; otherwise, unprofessional manipulation tends to remain evident. Similarly, participant 5 proposed that media owners or promoters should also have a basic knowledge of journalism, and should demonstrate their commitment to respecting journalistic values and ethics. Some of the interview participants believed that the role of an accountability mechanism like press council is important when grievances of media audiences are not handled properly (Participants 1, 3 & 7).

Subcategory 4: Strengthening Press Council Nepal.

Table 11: Strengthening Press Council Nepal

Subcategory 4	Participant	Representative quotes
Strengthening Press Council Nepal.	1	"editors of two different political tabloids have been appointed as PCN board members, and they are still executive chiefs of these papers. These tabloids are widely infamous for promoting partisan interests and missionary journalism, and many people lodge cases at PCN against these papers for reputation damage or biased reporting"
	3	"not mandated to prosecute in cases of violations of ethics and laws by online media"

Participants 1, 3 and 5 believed that growth of unprofessional practices in Nepali media, including online, is the consequence of weak monitoring mechanisms. Participant 1 argued that the autonomous and independent performance of PCN, the authorized monitoring body in Nepal, is very weak because it has been severely affected by the political appointment practices of its executive board. He further explains,

Editors of two different political tabloids [*Sanghu* weekly and *Janaastha* weekly] have been appointed as PCN board members, and they are still executive chiefs of these papers. These tabloids are widely infamous for promoting partisan interests and missionary journalism, and many people lodge cases at PCN against these papers for reputation damage or biased reporting. It is simple to guess that PCN cannot do justice in cases against those newspapers, whose executive chiefs are serving as board members (Participant 1, September 4, 2013).

In addition to being politically dominated, PCN has been weak due to its legal mandate. Participant 3 argued that PCN was established mainly for print media, and was "not mandated to prosecute cases of violations of ethics and laws by online media" (September 2, 2013).

Participant 1 pointed out that PCN lacks adequate infrastructure and resources to handle "more than 800 newspapers, 350 radio stations and two dozen television channels" (September 4, 2013). Participants 1 and 6 argued that PCN has not mandated the prosecution of online media in cases of violations of ethics and laws, and therefore, people are lodging complaints directly in the courts when they feel that injustice has been done in news reporting.

Most of the interview participants raised their concern that the political appointment practices of PCN Board members may be a responsible factor in weakening the media monitoring body (Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 & 9). Participant 1 contented that "had PCN been working independently and professionally, partisan journalism already would have been stopped in Nepal" (September 4, 2013). Participants 1 and 6 considered that political appointees lacked the moral strength to discourage unprofessional practices such as partisan interests within media houses.

In summary, this theme has assessed the key factors (such as role of audiences, increment of media literacy, and strengthening PCN) that can make media accountable to public and professional stakeholders on digital platforms. Interview participants believed that reduction of the digital divide, strengthening media literacy, and effective role of monitoring bodies like press councils can make media accountable to public and professional stakeholders.

Conclusion

Interview section of the findings was assessed in three themes, and explanation of subcategories under each theme. The first theme presented the findings of the study's main research question: what is the state of online journalism in Nepal with regards to accountability? In this theme, conceptual understanding of media accountability, practices of handling public grievances in Nepali media, and key stakeholders of online media with regard to accountability to professional self-regulation and general public have been discussed. The second theme responded to the first sub-question: what are the key challenges for ensuring accountability in journalism created using a digital platform? A number of issues were identified as challenges facing online media in Nepal that are obstacles to the enhancement of accountability in online news portals. Finally, the third theme accumulated the findings of the second sub-question: what

role do audiences play in making online news media accountable? Study participants discussed the role of audiences and also made a number of suggestions that could empower audiences and improve media accountability in the future. The next section will present the findings of archival records of five news stories to ensure the consistency of accountability practices in the five most viewed online media outlets.

4.3 Archival Records

In this section, the contents of five news stories, taken from the archives of the selected news portals, are analyzed (see Table 12 below for the analysis of five archived news stories) in order to assess whether or not accountability practices in the selected news portals are consistent with the findings of the aforementioned twenty-five news stories. Before the interview dates, the editors of the news portals were contacted in order to identify one recently published news report by each of the participating reporters. Contacting the editors was important because the majority of the online news stories were published without bylines. Then, these five stories (News 26 to 30) were located and analyzed using the same criteria that were used to analyze the other twenty-five news stories.

Table 12: Data presentation of five archived news stories

News headlines	<i>News 26: Government fails to end Adhikari couple's hunger strike</i>	<i>News 27: Unmanaged wastes stink Teku</i>	<i>News 28: Adhikari's murderer unknown: Home Ministry</i>	<i>News 29: Sit-in protest outside Bir Hospital demanding justice for Adhikari couple</i>	<i>News 30: CIAA arrests 10 more officials of Electricity Authority</i>
Published date	Sept 4, 2013	Sept 1, 2013	Aug 29, 2013	Aug 30, 2013	Sept 1, 2013
News portal/ Indicators	Onlinekhabar.com	eKantipur.com	Nagariknews.com	Setopati.com	Ujyalo.com
<i>Given information is truthful and reliable</i>	No, Seems very close to another source	Yes,	Yes,	Yes,	No, 3 spelling errors, No byline
<i>Source is quoted and clearly mentioned</i>	Yes, Indirect quotes only	Yes, 3 direct quotes, 1 anonymous quote, No byline	Yes, No direct quote No byline	Yes, 1 source, no direct quote	Yes, 1 source, No direct quote, No byline

<i>Reader's feedback and critical opinions are provided platform</i>	N/A, No comments available	N/A, No comments available	N/A, No comments available	Yes, 1 comment	N/A, No comments available
<i>Advertisements are not presented as news</i>	Yes,	Yes,	Yes,	Yes,	Yes,
<i>Errors are corrected and acknowledged</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No, 3 errors not corrected
<i>News stories are archived for future reference</i>	Yes,	Yes,	Yes,	Yes, Location changed	Yes, Location changed
<i>Photos are credited and not altered.</i>	No	N/A	N/A	No	N/A

Information verification. Each of the five news stories was compared with three different external sources, mainly the websites of traditional news outlets. Several accountability-related features of each story (such as accuracy, source use, audience response, the presence of advertorials, news correction, archiving, and photo use) were carefully checked in order to assess the accuracy and reliability of the five news stories. In terms of language and facts, News 26 was found to be very similar to a story on the external news source *gorkhapatraonline.com*, published earlier than News 26. News 30 contained at least three errors in the use of proper nouns.

Information source. All five news stories mentioned one or more sources of information, but only News 27 used direct quotations. News 28 was a press release-based report in which the reporter did not approach the official sources to get detailed information with direct quotations. In addition, three news stories out of the five (News 27, 28 & 30) were published without the bylines of the contributing reporters, who were identified via telephone contact with the editors of the news portals in question. None of the five stories used anonymous sources.

Platforms for audience feedback. Platforms for audience comments were available under each of the five news stories. Only one story (News 29) received a comment. Interestingly, two stories (News 26 & 30) were also found shared on respective portals' Facebook pages, and

received eight and ten comments respectively on that platform. This suggests that audiences are more active on social media platforms than in the news portals themselves.

Advertising is not presented as news: Each of the five news stories was compared with three external sources in order to assess whether it was a genuine news story and not an advertorial. Three of the news stories were about political activity, and two were related to the activities of government agencies. Therefore, none of the news reports were found to serve the interests of advertisers or sponsors.

Correction and acknowledgment of errors. News 30 had at least three errors, related to the names of government officials, which had not yet been corrected. Moreover, there was not a single comment below the story to indicate the errors, and the ten comments on the portal's Facebook page also did not point out the errors.

News archiving for future reference. All five news stories were found in the archives of their respective news portals, though two of the stories (News 29 & 30) were moved to different Internet locations. The entire text of each of the news stories was found without edits or alterations when monitored five months later. A lack of links to previously published stories was one of the significant trends observed in Nepali news portals. It was found that news stories related to each other, or even follow-up stories, were not properly linked to previous stories. For example, News 30 (Headline: CIAA arrests 10 more officials of Electricity Authority) was a follow-up story, but did not provide a hyperlink to the main story. Similarly, News 26, 28, and 29 were also related to developing stories, but the news portals failed to provide links to their previous reports on the same issues.

Photo credit and fair use. The fair use of photos is an important indicator of media accountability. It is even more important in online media because the duplication and alteration

of photos are easier on digital platforms than in traditional media, which often use original photos from their own sources. Out of the five news stories, only two (News 26 & 29) used photos, but these were not credited. Interestingly, similar photos were found in other news portals, so these photos could not be authenticated, and might have been taken from other sources without permission.

To conclude, this section assessed the findings of five archived news reports. All news stories were found archived for future reference, and not of the advertisement is found presented as news stories. However, various issues such as factual errors in the news, lack of reporters' bylines, lack of critical feedback, use of indirect quotes, and use of photos without credits are found as drawbacks. The findings of this section largely equate and closely consistent to the findings of 'document review' section.

Chapter Conclusion

The chapter was divided into three sections based on the different data collection methods used: Document review, Interviews, and Archival records. The Interview section was chunked down and presented in the form of themes and subcategories. Similarly, the findings of the Document review and Archival records sections were interpreted in seven criteria of accountability developed on the bases of CAJ (2011) and PCN (2008) ethical guidelines.

The following understanding of state of accountability in online news media emerged from the data: News media of Nepal (traditional or online) have been focusing on audience frame of accountability, but market influence and political manipulation are overriding the frame. Online news portals in Nepal are suffering from multiple challenges including newness and recognition, significance of gatekeeping, issues related to investment and sustainability, and issues related to code of ethics, such as post deletion, plagiarism, and content moderation.

Participants were found hopeful that if media education is enhanced and digital divide is reduced, audiences can play a significant role as citizen journalists in making online media accountable by using their non-traditional features, such as interactivity, accessibility, unlimited space, and multimedia format.

The findings from the document review of twenty-five news stories and archival records of five news stories assessed the trends of practicing media accountability on digital platforms in Nepal. None of the stories were found published as advertorial, and all stories were found archived for future references. However, some of the key problems identified were: factual errors and with no corrections, content alteration after they are published, majority of news stories published without reporters' bylines, and use of photos without proper credit. The findings of the interviews and everyday journalism practice in the field assessed through Document review and Archival records closely resembled the state of online media in Nepal.

The following chapter will analyze these findings in relation to the main research question and two sub-questions: What is the state of online journalism in Nepal with regard to accountability? What are the key challenges for ensuring accountability in news stories created using digital platforms? And, what role do audiences play in making online news media accountable?

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter responds the study's research question and sub-questions: What is the state of online journalism in Nepal with regard to accountability? What are the key challenges for ensuring accountability in journalism created using a digital platform? And, what role do audiences play in making online news media accountable? To this end, the findings derived from the three data collection methods (i.e., document review, interview, and archival records) and presented in the previous chapter will be analyzed to determine the state of online media in Nepal from the professional and audience stakeholders of accountability, as described by various media scholars including Christians (1989) and McQuail (2003).

RQ 1. What is the state of online journalism in Nepal with regards to accountability?

Based on the findings of the three different information collection methods, a variety of topics are discussed to analyze the main research question. The discussion topics include the interview participants' conceptual understanding of media accountability, the status of handling grievances, media accountability in practice, and finally, the emphasis of online media among the four frames of accountability – legal, market, public, and professional.

Conceptual understanding of media accountability. Most of the interview participants interpreted the concept of accountability as a form of social responsibility that follows a code of ethics in accordance with international standards (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 & 9). The participants named various stakeholders of media accountability including government bodies, political parties, the market, regulatory agencies, media owners, pressure groups, and news sources, but acknowledged audiences as the primary stakeholders of media accountability with regard to the quality or consequences of published/broadcast content. Though participants

admitted that they could not define "media accountability" from a theoretical or academic point of view, their practical understanding of the concept is close to that described by media scholars.

Media scholars define accountability as a voluntary or involuntary process, in which media can be held legally, morally or socially accountable to the general public, professional institutions, or government bodies for their quality of performance (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Christians, 1989; Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 2003; Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000). Media accountability, according to these scholars, is aimed at improving the quality of media products or services, increasing audience trust through quality performance, minimizing harm to individuals or society, and protecting the values of journalism through self-regulation.

A majority of study participants (all those representing associated online news portals: *ekantipur.com*, *nagariknews.com*, and *ujyaloonline.com*) observed that traditional media outlets – newspapers and radio stations in particular – perform better than online news portals in maintaining accountability to the public because of their long experience and their tradition of exercising ethics (Participants 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, & 10). Similarly, these participants perceived that associated online media (news portals parented by traditional media) were performing better than online-only news portals with regard to public and professional stakeholders of media accountability. They argued that associated online portals can benefit from the available resources (such as infrastructure, a wide network of journalists, and systematic gatekeeping mechanisms) and continuous professional practices of traditional media.

However, media scholars (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Hilton, 2012; Porlezza, 2012; Singer, 2005) believe that Internet-based media platforms (such as online news portals, blogs, social media pages, etc.) are more amenable to public accountability because of

their interactivity and hyperlink features than traditional media outlets. Consistent with these media scholars' arguments, study participants representing online-only media (i.e. *setopati.com* and *onlinekhabar.com*) contended that online media have more potential to be accountable to the public by providing access to global audiences, offering unlimited space for audience feedback and criticism, and updating information immediately (Participants 1, 2, 7 & 8). These participants criticized the associated online news portals for merely “shoveling” (or reproducing) traditional media content onto digital platforms, while also criticizing, the online-only news portals (i.e. *onlinekhabar.com* and *setopati.com*) for depending on secondary sources for a significant portion of their news content.

The aforementioned assessments of which media are better for upholding accountability to the public may reflect the biased perceptions of journalists owing to their affiliations with particular media. However, most of the interview participants believed that particular media platforms themselves are not adequate to uphold media accountability to public and professional stakeholders, and that resource availability, as well as the professional commitments of journalists and media leadership, can make any media (traditional or online) accountable to public and professional stakeholders.

Status of handling audience grievances. News media, in general, may encounter multiple grievances from the general public regarding issues such as factual errors, a biased presentation, plagiarism, or violations of the journalistic code of ethics. Regarding grievance handling strategies in online news portals, interview participants described different steps for journalists or media houses to follow when handling public grievances: (a) journalists or media institutions should listen to audiences or the concerned public in order to understand the issue, (b) journalists should acknowledge errors quickly and admit mistakes publicly, (c) information

should be updated transparently as soon as possible, and (d) media outlets should provide a place where audiences can express their concerns. Interview participants suggested that when such steps are not followed properly, a third party like a press council or a court should get involved as a final resort to settle public grievances. McQuail (2003) similarly describes two types of grievance handling strategies for making media accountable: first, media or journalists give justification for their actions to the public by explaining, informing, confessing or apologizing unilaterally (only the media is involved) or bilaterally (media and audience are involved). He also, like the participants, supports the idea of involving third parties (such as ombudsmen, press councils, and government agencies) as a final resort, noting that they are useful for negotiating claims through financial compensation or other types of liability.

Effective grievance handling practices foster greater accountability to audiences. The research study finds that there are several obstacles in day-to-day practice of online news portals in Nepal that impede proper grievance handling. For instance, many Nepali news portals (especially small-scale online-only portals), as argued by interview participants (Participants 5 & 6), withhold detailed contact information (such as telephone numbers, postal address, and information about reporters and editors affiliated with the institution) in order to shield themselves from legal actions or social challenges resulting from news reporting. Such news portals usually provide an email or feedback template for audience responses, and audience queries are seldom answered. When media portals use such one-way communication tools, audiences cannot enjoy interactivity, expect responsible replies to their grievances, participate in the news making process, or make online media accountable, despite the non-traditional features of the digital platform (such as global accessibility, transparency through hyperlinks, and interactivity). One participant labeled the trend of withholding contact information on digital

platforms as a "semi-underground way of journalism" and believed that this trend violates journalistic values and ethical practices. By emphasizing the multi-step grievance-handling process described above, participants maintained that interaction and dialogue are the most important strategies for accountably handling public grievances.

Another practice that limits online media accountability to professional and public stakeholders, interview participants admitted, is the removal or deletion of audience comments or news stories on various grounds such as obscenity, defamation, deliberate criticism or bias. The document review of twenty-five news stories and the analysis of five archived news reports showed that audience comments below stories on the news portals' websites were very few in number, and were generally positive and non-critical, but that the same stories shared on the portals' official Facebook pages received many critical comments. This finding raises a speculation that audience critical comments may have been removed from the reviewed news portals for this study, especially as interview participants admitted to occasional cases of post deletion.

Some participants argued that online news portals receive more feedback from audiences, but all feedback cannot be published in the news portals due to issues of accuracy, language quality, and defamation. Additionally, only one news portal out of the five (www.ekantipur.com) has a formal feedback receiving policy, and it is only one sentence: "Comments containing abusive words or slander shall not be published." Thus, fair treatment of critical feedback is hard to expect. Some participants admitted that their news portals deleted published posts on various grounds such as political pressure and market influence, but that none of the media houses had developed any policy for post deletion. Interview participants were confused regarding the

ethical impact of post deletion and were waiting for guidelines from PCN, which itself is waiting for a broader mandate to monitor the country's online news portals.

The following section assesses the observations of the interview participants with regard to media accountability to professional and public stakeholders through the document review of twenty-five news stories and the archival records of five news stories.

Media accountability in practice. In a democratic society, the free market system works in an open environment and promotes media pluralism (McQuail, 1997; Merrill, 1989). A free market works according to a supply and demand model, covers a wide range of issues, encourages 'good' and discourages 'bad' performances, and keeps the interests of producers and consumers in balance (McQuail, 2005). Nepal, since the restoration of democracy in 1990, has experienced a transformation in the media and communication sector, with 134 dailies, 559 weeklies and many other periodicals publishing regularly (UNESCO, 2013). Similarly, more than 350 radio stations, 24 television channels, and approximately 300 online news portals are in regular operation in Nepal (Ekantipur, 2013b; UNESCO, 2013). FNJ records show that there are more than eight thousand journalists working in different media outlets throughout the country (Media Foundation, 2012). These statistics demonstrate that Nepal has a pluralistic environment and a free market system, which can facilitate accountability in media institutions and journalists.

However, the robust media environment, despite its impressive quantitative presence has not been able to make satisfactory qualitative progress with regard to holding media accountable in everyday performance (IFAMMN, 2012; IMMN, 2008; UNESCO, 2013). The findings of the document review of twenty-five news stories and the archival records of five news stories reflect

that non-traditional features of online media such as interactivity and transparency have not been practiced adequately in the online news portals reviewed for this study. For instance, a majority of the news stories did not include bylines. The trend of withholding bylines in online news media can call news sources into question — in turn raising questions about whether online news media depend on secondary sources and merely reconstruct their news stories. Similarly, more than half of the total news stories reviewed were written in indirect speech, and some of them were found to be merely narrative reports, not quoting even a single source, or using anonymous sources without any justification for anonymity. These practices are against professional norms and cannot enhance media accountability, as various media institutions (such as CAJ, 2011; PCN, 2008; SPJ, 1996) have emphasized that news stories must mention sources clearly and quote accurately. In addition, articles 3(4) and 4(13) of the Code of Journalistic Ethics 2003, (Amended and revised 2008) for Nepali journalists discourage writing news without citing sources, provided that there is no exceptional circumstance (PCN, 2008).

Providing hyperlinks to related stories or authentic sources can be another important indicator of transparency (as well as accountability) in online news media (Friend & Singer, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). The findings of the document review and the archival records reflect that the selected Nepali news portals were found to be less transparent in this regard than the set standards require, and were, therefore, also less accountable.

Correcting errors or updating news with proper acknowledgement is another basic requirement of practicing media accountability in online media (CAJ, 2011; PCN, 2008). However, the five top-viewed news portals were not found to acknowledge updates or modifications of news content. In the same way, most of the photos used in the news stories were

not credited at all, and identification of the primary sources of the credited photos was also difficult because similar photos were found in other sources without credit.

Errors cannot be completely eliminated from any news portal, due to two fundamental but competing aspects of journalism: accuracy and speed (Joseph, 2011). Nonetheless, "the need for speed should never compromise accuracy, credibility or fairness" during content selection and presentation in any news media (CAJ, 2011). Presenting advertisements or sponsored content as news encourages market intervention in news media, and severely affects media accountability to professional and public stakeholders (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; McQuail, 2003). The findings of the document review and the archival records show that no advertisement was found presented as news in the news stories reviewed for this research. This is perhaps the most important strength factor of the selected Nepali news portals. Similarly, CAJ (2010) and English (2009) have emphasized that the permanence of digital content (archiving news content in online media) can be an important indicator of media accountability. To this end, all the news stories selected for this research were found archived for future reference, though five of them were found in changed locations. Still, these two strength factors (not presenting advertisements as news, and archiving online content for future reference) have been far outnumbered by the multiple weakness factors. The next section assesses where Nepali online media's main focus lies among the four frames of media accountability outlined by media scholars.

Market accountability dominates Nepali news portals. The four fundamental frames of accountability (*political or legal, market or financial, audience or public, and professional or self-regulatory*) are applied to analyze the influence of particular stakeholders on media outlets. Most of the interview participants emphasized the importance of online media accountability to

the audience, but they admitted that the market is the most influential stakeholder in practice. In addition, the participants also agreed that political stakeholders are less influential on online media than the market, and that the professional or self-regulatory accountability frame is the least prioritized in online media.

Several of the interview participants observed that the market has practically influenced media outlets in Nepal (Participants 1, 5, 6 & 7). According to them, corporate media with large-scale investment (such as television channels, national or regional radio stations, and broadsheet daily newspapers) are highly loyal to market interests in order to maintain regular operating costs and hopefully to generate profits. McQuail (2003) explains that a variety of issues such as profitability, competition, technological development, and quality of service may influence media to be accountable to the market. Half of the interview participants argued that the major focus of media owners is on profitability, and that, as a consequence, the quality of media content may be compromised. A couple of participants maintained that advertisement and sponsorship of content are occasionally being used in the media they (the participants) are involved as preventive measures to curb media criticism of market actors (Participants 1 & 7).

After market influence, political influence is the most widespread in the selected online news portals, as well as in Nepali media in general, due to political polarization among journalists and the increased influence of politics in content selection. Major political parties have their own media, or media under their influence, in order to support their actions or promote favorable propaganda (UNESCO, 2013). Similarly, the Government of Nepal operates a number of media outlets, which tend to be loyal to the ruling powers and to remain subject to extensive government control (IMMN, 2008; Media Foundation, 2012). In addition, media with small-scale investment (such as weekly newspapers and online-only news portals) are, as some

interview participants observed, more influenced by partisan interests because the market seldom trusts them, and they need financial support from any source in order to be sustainable.

The interview participants considered the audience as theoretically the most important stakeholder of accountability for media in Nepal. The selected Nepali online media tend, the participants claimed, to follow social responsibility theory (Participants 1, 3, 5, 7, 8 & 9) and therefore ought to be guided by audience feedback (Participants 3 & 8) and to address audience interests by providing a variety of content (Participants 6 & 9). Similarly, participants believed that the active participation of audiences in the news making process can improve news quality by contributing relevant information, verifying facts, and reducing errors (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9 & 10). Scholars support this perspective, arguing that in a democratic society, the general public has the right to information, and media outlets are given privileges to facilitate information dissemination and to serve the public, and media outlets operate on behalf of the public rather than the owners or other stakeholders (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Christians et al., 1989; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; McQuail, 2003).

However, a majority of the interview participants argued that guidance from audiences is not enough to make media accountable to the public in Nepal because a large proportion of audiences do not know anything about media responsibility and ethics. Therefore, the participants recommended that accountability to the audience should be in accordance with accountability to professional stakeholders. Participants suggested that, to uphold standards of professional self-regulation, journalists need to be educated, trained, and committed to journalistic values and ethics, and editorial leadership must be strong and committed to serving the public interest.

Media scholars (Christians et al., 1989; Fengler, 2012; McQuail, 2003) suggest that the professional (or self-regulatory) frame should prevail over other frames of media accountability to avoid threats of external (such as government) intervention, and to be responsible to the general public. McQuail (2003) notes that the professional and public frames of accountability can be better implemented by media self-regulation than by external pressures. However, participants argued that professional self-regulation in practice is the least influential frame of accountability in the selected online media in Nepal due to the dominant influence of the market and political stakeholders.

To conclude, among the four frames of accountability discussed by media scholars (such as Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Krogh 2012; McQuail, 2003), the audience frame is theoretically emphasized by the interview participants, but the market frame practically dominates media accountability in the selected Nepali news portals because media owners are interested in covering operational costs and making profits. Small-scale media (such as online-only news portals) are mostly dependent on political sources of support because the market has not trusted them as reliable media for advertising their services and products.

From the interview findings in response to research question one, it is observed that the selected associated online news portals are, to some extent, practicing professional self-regulation because they have adequate infrastructure, a strong network of human resources, and long experience of ethical practice by their journalists in traditional media outlets. If such resources were available to other media outlets, including online-only news portals, they could be equally accountable to professional and public stakeholders. However, the participants

identified a number of challenges for ensuring accountability in news media on digital platforms, as discussed in response to the first research sub-question.

Sub-question a) What are the key challenges for ensuring accountability in journalism created using a digital platform?

The challenges to media accountability on digital platforms in Nepal are discussed in relation to scholarly articles reviewed for this research, and in relation to the study's findings. It is important to note that most of the scholarly literature related to media accountability is focused on developed countries in Europe and North America, and very little is pondered on media accountability in African and Asian contexts. Heikkilä et al. (2012) carried out a comparative study of Internet-based news media in 13 different countries in Asia, Europe and North America, and found that media accountability practices can be different from country to country depending on external and internal circumstances, which include socio-economic and political factors, as well as the understanding of journalists and the newsroom environment.

When comparing the literature review to the study findings, the challenges in a developing country like Nepal are found to be slightly different than in the developed countries of Europe and North America. For example, crowdsourcing, post deletion or unpublishing, speedy updates and post-publication correction, the diminishing role of gatekeeping, and ethical dilemmas are some of the major challenges (Friend & Singer, 2007; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Krogh, 2012) in Europe and North America. However, newness and recognition of online media, investment and sustainability issues, diminishing significance of gatekeeping, and ethical dilemmas and lack of legal protection are the major challenges to media

accountability to public and professional stakeholders in the context of Nepal. These are discussed below:

Newness and recognition. Newness of online media seems less relevant in the developed West, where digital accessibility is very high and journalists are proficient in technological apparatus. However, Mabweazara, Mudhai and Whittaker (2014) argue that the 'newness' of Internet-based media is itself a challenge to defining online journalism in the context of developing countries. They believe that, in the developing world, journalism mediated by new technologies generally has not yet been supported by government mechanisms or recognized through legislation. The degree of newness described by Mabweazara et al. (2014) is further fuelled in a country like Nepal by the presence of a huge digital divide: only one fourth of the Nepali population can access the Internet, mostly through less sophisticated second generation mobile phones (NTA, 2014; Media Foundation, 2012). Interview findings reflect that journalists working in online media are in an experiential learning phase because most of the online journalists have migrated from traditional media platforms, and they are often less familiar with new media features. On the other hand, many people involved in online media can be more technocratic than journalistic because they have come from outside of the journalism field, and lack professional knowledge. Interview participants, therefore, supposed that journalists require more time to adapt to a new media environment. For one participant, the challenge of newness ends only after a generation of online journalists is produced. In addition, government agencies have not recognized online news portals as mainstream news media, and online journalists, as a consequence, are restricted from collecting information from government agencies. Additionally, online media are also deprived of government privileges and subsidies (such as tax deduction, the welfare fund, representation in the Press Council Nepal) which

traditional media have been enjoying for years. Such deprivations have created sustainability challenges for online news portals in Nepal.

Sustainability of online media. Western media scholars (for instance, Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Dennis et al., 1989; Friend & Singer, 2007; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 2003; Pritchard, 2000) on media accountability interpreted online media as being more effective, transparent, and accountable than their traditional counterparts. None of them clearly considered investment and sustainability as challenges to maintaining accountability in online media.

However, interview participants observed that large-scale investment and sustainability of online media are necessary elements of accountability on digital platforms. Small-scale investment in online media, according to interview participants, has created increased dependency on secondary sources because such media cannot establish their own networks to collect and verify information, and may spread sensational content to generate hits and collect Google money. Depending mainly on Google ad money for regular operation, online media outlets can lose their focus on the professional and public stakeholders.

Consequently, unethical practices (such as compromising journalistic integrity, depending on secondary sources, plagiarizing content, failing to verify information, and deleting published posts) may be encouraged for the sake of survival. Participants reasoned that many professionals and amateurs in Nepal have launched online news portals because they are relatively inexpensive to operate (Participants 1, 3 & 8). However, participants shared their experience that sustainability in the selected online news portals, as well as other online outlets in general, is more challenging than in traditional media for three reasons: first, the market is still reluctant to

advertise services and products in online news portals due to uncertainty about the extent of their audiences, given the digital divide. Next, the Government of Nepal does not provide privileges, including the welfare fund (which is provided to traditional media outlets to support their regular operations in exchange for the publication of social/educational advertisements) to online media outlets. And finally, Google stopped providing ads to Nepali-language news sites, though these ads had been a big source of support in operating online media in Nepal. Interview participants argued that when the market does not recognize online media as a means to advertise its services and products, the sustainability of online media is obviously in question. They also asserted that the selected online-only news portals have very limited human and infrastructural resources for collecting and verifying information through their own effort, and instead depend on secondary or undisclosed sources. As a result of small-scale investment and resultant limited human resources, the selected online media have overlooked gatekeeping activities, which are crucial to upholding media accountability to public and professional stakeholders.

Gatekeeping: Correction and verification. The role of gatekeepers remains vital on any media platform, despite technological changes, because the selection of relevant content is always important for ensuring media make socially responsible decisions.. However, scholars (such as Giannakouloupoulos, Varlamis & Kouloglou, 2012; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007) argue that the gatekeeping role of journalists on digital platforms is gradually disappearing because online journalists are engaged in information collection through crowdsourcing and content interpretation instead of independently discovering and verifying facts. Unauthorized use of news content (or plagiarism) is another key challenge on digital platforms, on which information is "easily acquired, repackaged and repurposed" through crowdsourcing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p.86).

Hasty news breaks with multiple errors are a global problem in online media. Scholars (such as Friend and Singer, 2007; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) note that new media technologies and market competition for 24/7 news updates have weakened news verification practices in online media. They argue that the 24/7 news cycle is responsible for errors arising from speedy updates because online journalists are habitually collecting information from the Internet or secondary sources. Study participants admitted that they engage in similar habits of speedy news breaks and post-publication correction in their online news portals because many portals rely on secondary sources and raw data. Moreover, interview participants believed that there are other issues as well, which may diminish the role of gatekeeping in a news media institution, such as the lack of a national network of reporters, the absence of media watchdog mechanisms, and deliberate partisan interests among media houses or journalists.

Interview participants were gravely concerned about increasing plagiarism or unauthorized content use in their own news portals as well as other media in Nepal in general. They observed that most of the local radio stations and newspapers in Nepal rely on Kathmandu-based news portals for information collection. In addition, the interview findings also reflect that the selected news portals also use unauthorized content from traditional media that have national networks of journalists to gather information. Similarly, some of the news portals were found to be collecting information from international news agencies and using it without permission or proper credit. Further, a limited number of journalists are employed in online media, so they tend to have multiple responsibilities, ranging from field reporting to desk editing. As a consequence of these resource constraints, information collection, selection and updating are limited, and dependence on secondary or undisclosed sources is increased.

During the research study, twenty-five news stories were reviewed to assess accountability in the practices of selected five online news portals in Nepal. More than half of the stories reviewed lacked bylines, and most of the photos used in the news stories lacked accreditation. This practice may justify Kovach and Rosenstiel's (2007) argument that information is being repackaged and repurposed on digital platforms. Therefore, interview participants argued that the ineffectiveness of legal remedies (such as the absence of legislation addressing online media issues, the lack of a PCN mandate to monitor online issues, and the high expense and slowness of the judicial process) is largely responsible for increased plagiarism. Such practices, participants argued, have also been stimulated by the absence of an online-specific code of ethics.

Ethical dilemmas and a lack of legal protection. New media have initiated a new discourse on media ethics — specifically, whether or not existing codes of ethics can address the issues of online media, such as privacy, copyright, content moderation, and collaborative news production through crowdsourcing. Scholars have contrasting opinions on these issues. Some scholars (e.g., English, 2009; English, Currie, & Link, 2010; Friend & Singer, 2007; Hohman, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Joseph, 2011) and media organizations (CAJ, 2011; Reuters, 2013) strongly advocate that professional standards of journalism transcend technological barriers, and that the principles and standards of journalism and media institutions apply in the same way. Furthermore, they argue that, in order to maintain permanency as in traditional media, digital content should be permanent, and therefore should not be unpublished (CAJ, 2010; English, 2009).

However, some other scholars (such as Acharya, 2005; Ward, 2010b; Ward & Wasserman, 2012; Whitehouse, 2010) argue that existing media ethics, which has developed

considering traditional media features, cannot adequately govern online media practices. For instance, requests to unpublish specific media content for various reasons are on the rise, but most online media outlets do not have policies to address such public requests. Most of the interview participants similarly argued that traditional media ethics is not enough to uphold professionalism and media accountability on digital platforms. They said that they are not clear on online media-related issues including post deletion, permanency of digital archives, and crowdsourcing of user-generated content.

The Canadian Association of Journalists, CAJ (2010), clearly mentions in the *Ethics of Unpublishing Papers* that "published digital content is part of the historical record and should not be unpublished. News organizations do not rewrite history or make news disappear." CAJ (2010) allows the unpublishing of content only in exceptional cases (for instance, unproved criminal charges, clear violations of privacy rights, or any other legal restrictions), but such unpublishing should be done only after a clear policy is in place, should be for the right reasons, and should be performed in a transparent and consistent manner.

Interview participants have been experiencing pressures from internal and external actors to delete or remove online posts from their news portals on various grounds. External pressures arise mostly from advertisers, who may cease to advertise if their products and services are affected by media content. Similarly, political groups also create substantial pressure to delete content that is against their interests. Internal pressure is the result of a clash of interests between publishers and journalists. In such situations, journalists have only two options— apply the owners' interests or get fired from their jobs. For example, according to one participant, cases of defiance of the interests of the publisher in the media outlet where he was working were rare. Interview participants were found to be experiencing a dilemma about the ethics of the practice

of post deletion, and they believed that publishers' loyalties to external actors and the lack of clear ethical provisions were the major causes of post deletion.

A lack of legal protection, as interview participants contended, is a significant threat to online media in Nepal, which are not recognized as mainstream news media by legislation. As a consequence, in cases of defamation or copyright infringement, online journalists are arrested and prosecuted under the Electronic Transaction Act, 2008. Even though not clearly mandated to monitor online media, PCN started an online news media registration campaign in July 2013 to bring all news portals into public notice and to monitor them effectively. Similarly, PCN has also constituted an online ethics draft committee in order to review existing ethical practices and recommend a comprehensive code of ethics to cover online media issues. It is hopeful to see these processes initiated by PCN, as there are multiple ethical issues related to online media accountability in Nepal which have been handled inconsistently because of the lack of clear policies and legislation regulating online media.

Interview participants affirmed that increased interactivity or participation of audiences can overcome these challenges to media accountability on digital platforms to the professional and public stakeholders. The response to the next research sub-question, therefore, analyzes the role of audiences with regard to making media accountable, along with some strategies for increasing the participation of audiences in online media, and the role of PCN as a mechanism for promoting accountability to the public on digital platforms and for facilitating the settlement of public grievances against news media.

Sub-question b) What role do audiences play in making online news media accountable?

In the past, audiences were not considered knowledgeable enough to evaluate the performance of news media, but today, according to Fengler (2012) and Groenhart (2012), audiences in many countries are highly involved in the use of media accountability instruments (such as press councils, ombudsmen, media blogs and feedback response units) to make media more accountable to the professional and public stakeholders. Solzhenitsyn (1978) argues that audiences, for media and journalists, are like the parliament to which a democratic government remains accountable. Buchanan, Hammerer, & Money-Kyrle (2005) believe that media and journalists must be accountable to the public because they "hold certain traditional rights on behalf of citizens" (p.16). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) emphasize the importance of the public with regard to media accountability, stating that "journalism's first loyalty is to citizens" (p.52).

Moreover, according to several scholars, the role of audiences is larger on digital platforms than in traditional media because the former incorporate non-traditional features to keep audiences actively watching the watchdogs (Friend & Singer, 2007; Heikkila et al., 2012; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). The non-traditional features of digital platforms can, for instance, help online media audiences to access content from anywhere on the planet and to remain updated at any time, to have unlimited time and space to comment on particular issues, and to effectively engage with news content through online media's interactivity and multimedia format. Hence, a number of media scholars (such as Babcock, 2012; Cenite & Zhang, 2012; Friend & Singer, 2007; McQuail, 2003; Ward & Wasserman, 2012; White, 2008) have placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of audiences of online media in making the media accountable. These scholars argue that audiences in the digital age are not merely passive

recipients of media production but also active citizen journalists because digital platforms can empower audiences to react, question, and ask for further clarification if they disagree with media information, and can thereby oblige newsmakers to be accountable for their products.

Through crowdsourcing, today's audiences are also taking part in content production. Porlezza (2012) asserts that the "public is no longer a passive consumer" because they can produce media content and can contribute to the growth of citizen journalism (p. 2). User-generated content "allows the audience to access a huge amount of information" as never before because media institutions are dependent on audiences' contributions (Fengler, Eberwein, & Leppik-Bork, 2011, p. 21). In addition to engaging in collaborative content production with professional journalists, audiences can verify and corroborate information and thereby can urge media performance toward the public and professional stakeholders. Hence, the role of audiences is important to the monitoring of journalists' performance, encouraging them to maintain a high level of accountability in the digital realm.

The role of audiences in making media responsible and accountable to the public for their actions and performance is important in any media format, traditional or new (McQuail, 1997, 2003, 2005). Since online media information is being updated in a 24/7 news cycle, a continuous interactive relationship between audiences and journalists is very important (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Friend & Singer, 2007). Illustrating the importance of audiences in making media accountable, McQuail (2005) points out that "where media are seen to be failing, they may be called to account by public opinion or other guardians of the public interests" (p. 213). Participants for this study also expressed a similar opinion, arguing that if more people have access to online media, they can constantly monitor online news portals to corroborate

information, and through critical feedback can create pressure on journalists to be accountable to their audiences, society, or the public. The research findings indicate that a reduction of the digital divide and a rise in media literacy may significantly encourage audiences to join digital platforms and watch the watchdogs. In addition, strong and effective monitoring bodies such as press councils or ombudsmen are required to safeguard audience interests in cases where media houses and journalists ignore public interests and deviate from the professional track to emphasize political or market interests.

Audience participation through digital accessibility. The lack of a wider public to actively monitor online media content has also been a major factor in limiting the accountability of Nepali online news portals to audiences across the country. Nepal is struggling for the most basic level of the digital divide: accessibility, or basic infrastructure. Nepal's 28.67 percent total Internet penetration includes Internet connectivity on all devices (mobile, computer, etc.), but most of this is on second-generation mobile phones with very limited usability. There is no research available that assesses users' knowledge and skills in handling Internet issues, and quality of connection and affordability of service. Due to such issues, Hilbert (2010) argues that access to the Internet is not a sufficient condition for overcoming the digital divide, as a large segment of audiences in developing countries cannot access and monitor online media outlets, despite the availability of some basic level of Internet connection.

Most of the interview participants believed that reducing the digital divide can increase the size of the audiences who can constantly monitor media content, immediately comment to point out factual errors or media biases, and share their thoughts and interact with journalists on the issues that concern them (Participants 1, 3, 6, 7, 8 & 9). According to these participants, a

general audience can monitor media performance to make sure journalists are following journalistic values and ethics, and are accountable to the public. Majority of interview participants believed that if the public cannot access online media, they cannot monitor the performance of news portals, and therefore cannot play an effective role in making media accountable to the public stakeholders. Therefore, audiences' ability to access digital media, as participants maintained, is very important because, as the study findings suggest, the more audiences participate as citizen journalists in news portals, the better they can examine the quality of news content.

Social media are platforms where today's audiences can meet news producers/journalists, share information, express grievances, participate in the news production process, and help to verify information in news stories before or after they are published. The findings of the document review and archival records indicate that audiences of the selected online news portals in Nepal write more comments about media performance on social media (such as Facebook) than on the news portals themselves. However, the findings do not indicate that the presence of an increased number of visitors on digital platforms necessarily means that the visitors understand the media system and can examine content quality. Therefore, audience empowerment through media literacy can be very important to the promotion of meaningful participation.

Audience empowerment through media literacy. Not all audiences who consume media content regularly may be familiar with journalistic values and how the media functions. Even though online accessibility can increase audience participation, it cannot guarantee the quality of audience participation (which requires a critical understanding of the media system as

well as knowledge of journalistic principles and values and the role of audiences). Scholars argue that educated audiences can make a significant difference in making media accountable by raising their concerns with media managers (McQuail, 2003; Merrill, 1989; Babcock, 2012). Therefore, capacity building of the general public in regard to the media system – also called media literacy – is very important to making journalists and news media accountable to the public.

Knowledge of professional norms and conventions in journalism can influence the functioning of media institutions by fostering regular interaction between the general public (the audience) and journalists (Fengler, 2012; McQuail, 2003; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Interview findings reflect that not all audiences in Nepal may be able to critically examine media content in accordance with the professional and ethical values of journalism because of the lack of media literacy promotion. Interview participants expressed their hopes that increased media literacy can positively influence media accountability on digital platforms by empowering audiences to participate and monitor media content.

Scholars (such as Friend & Singer, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007) noted that media literacy is not only required for mass audiences, but also for various stakeholders including media owners and technical people involved in online media, as many of them are from non-journalistic backgrounds. On a similar note, interview participants observed that media literacy among such stakeholders (e.g., media owners, members of management teams, and technical staff) can be helpful in lessening unprofessional influences and in reinforcing media accountability to public stakeholder. Fengler (2012) argues that audiences can be empowered as citizen journalists through the media literacy process, and can participate in collaborative news

production. Interview participants experience that only media-literate audiences can better contribute to news production through crowdsourcing. Therefore, media literacy may be an important factor in facilitating the ideas of citizen journalism and crowdsourcing among audiences, and may shift audiences' paradigm from consumer or media monitors to content contributors.

Grievance handling through press council. Some of the interview participants argued that digital accessibility and media literacy are not adequate to ensure the effective role of audiences in media accountability to professional and public stakeholders. The participants further argued that media institutions can deliberately ignore audience grievances against, and criticism of, media and journalists, fearing that the publication of such grievances might damage their public image. Moreover, news media in Nepal have not yet employed in-house ethics assessment mechanisms such as ombudsmen or internal ethics committees to handle public grievances in a credible and transparent manner (Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). In such a situation, media monitoring mechanisms such as press councils can be an appropriate alternative for facilitating disputed issues, and can play an effective role in promoting audience interests.

A press council is an important institution for regulating media outlets and obliging them to demonstrate accountable performance to professional and public stakeholders (Balk, 1989; McQuail, 2003). In general, a press council is constituted for two basic purposes: to regulate media performance in order to propagate quality content, and to defend media freedom by safeguarding against external interventions such as political and market influence (Balk, 1989).

Press Council Nepal (PCN) is responsible for maintaining a harmonious relationship between media institutions and the public, and is also responsible for defending the dignity and morality of the citizens (Press Council Act, 1992). However, PCN lacks adequate human and infrastructural resources and effective monitoring mechanisms to cover hundreds of newspapers and radio stations and dozens of television stations (UNESCO, 2013). Many people are still ignorant of the role of PCN, and seldom lodge complaints against media or journalists (Media Foundation, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). In addition, the government selects PCN board members based on political loyalties rather than incumbents' experience and contributions to media and the journalism field (IMMN, 2008; IFAMMN, 2012). As a consequence of political influence, interview participants contend that PCN cannot effectively monitor media and journalists with regard to their performance in remaining accountable to public interests.

Even though, as participants argued, online news portals are largely unregulated by PCN because of the lack of a legislative mandate and clear policies, participants believed that a strong, independent press council can take a leading role in the capacity building of journalists and in promoting media literacy programs as a means to cultivate interactive citizen journalists and, thereby, accountable media. Interview participants believed that an effective press council would value unorganized audiences' interactive participation and their role in making journalists and media accountable to their concerns.

To sum up, audiences can play a significant role in making online media accountable to public and professional stakeholders because digital platforms provide many non-traditional features that empower audiences to access, monitor, interact with, pressure, and follow up on online media content. As a citizen journalist, an audience member can access online news

portals, can monitor media content, can interact (through questions and criticism) with journalists or anybody else responsible for content, can create pressure before, during and after content production, and can provide constant follow-up to ensure conformity with professional norms and values in online media performance. However, in order for this to happen, such important factors as digital accessibility and media literacy, and media accountability mechanisms such as press councils – all of which can make audience more competent and proactive – are needed.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has presented analyses responding to the study's research question and sub questions to assess the state of online journalism in Nepal with regard to media accountability, to identify key challenges for ensuring media accountability on digital platforms, and to evaluate the role of audiences, who can be instrumental in making online news media accountable.

In response to the main research question on the state of online journalism in Nepal with regard to accountability, it is assessed that interview participants understand the concept of media accountability, and that there are a number of areas where the selected online media can improve media practices to make these media more accountable to professional and public stakeholders. It is also observed that the selected online news portals associated with traditional media are more accountable than online-only news portals in maintaining or upholding accountability. In addition, the market is considered the most influential stakeholder in terms of manipulating media content, overshadowing media's accountability to professional and public stakeholders. In response to the first sub-question, regarding accountability challenges, four key challenges were identified. Since online media practice is a new phenomenon, Nepal has not developed any legislation to govern online media or to address issues created on digital platforms, and no

online-specific ethical codes have been formulated. Issues related to the sustainability of online media are another key challenge because the market has not trusted online media to promote its services and products. The selected online-only media are found suffering from limited human resources, with multiple roles overlapped, and as a consequence the gatekeeping function has almost vanished.

Despite these challenges, it is found that the role of audiences can be very instrumental in making media accountable to professional and public stakeholders through increased participation and interactivity. In response to the second sub-question, three strategies have been recommended by participants to actively engage audiences in making media accountable: (a) digital accessibility should be increased to expand audience participation, (b) media literacy should be promoted to empower audiences to become familiar with the professional values and ethics of media so that they can monitor media content and journalists' performance effectively, and (c) public grievances, when they remain unaddressed by media institutions, should be handled by media accountability mechanisms such as press councils.

A brief summary of the findings and their significance, as well the research limitations and the areas for future exploration, will be presented in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to examine the state of online journalism in Nepal with regard to accountability of journalists to public and professional stakeholders on digital platforms. This concluding chapter presents a summary of the findings, the significance of the findings, and a discussion of the limitations of the research. Finally, the chapter concludes by suggesting avenues for future research.

6.1 Summary of Findings

The findings of this study are based on three different data collection sources as recommended in the case study research method: a document review of twenty-five news stories, qualitative semi-structured interviews with ten online journalists, and archival records of five news stories. The document review of the twenty-five news stories, selected from the five most-viewed online news portals in Nepal, helped to assess the everyday practices of accountability of online news media. The interview conversations with ten online journalists allowed the researcher to clearly comprehend the participants' understanding of media accountability, their working environment, the challenges faced by the selected online news portals, and the role of audiences in making online media accountable to public and professional stakeholders. Finally, in corroboration with the findings of the document review, the archival records of five news stories were used to examine the consistency of the practical application of accountability tools by the online journalists participated in this research study.

The findings of various media scholars (such as Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Christians, et al., 1989; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 2003 & 2005; Pritchard, 2000; Singer,

2005) indicate that news media can be more accountable on digital platforms than on traditional platforms; this research study, therefore, was designed to assess the state of accountability of online news media in Nepal to see if it is consistent with these studies. Furthermore, the research was also designed to identify key challenges for ensuring accountability in journalism on digital platforms, and to assess the role of audiences in making online news media accountable to public and to professional stakeholders.

This thesis study finds that there is a wide gap between the media accountability standards set by various media organizations and the practical application of those standards by the selected news portals in Nepal. For instance, the document review of twenty-five online news stories and the archival records of five news stories demonstrate that archiving news content for future reference and not presenting advertisements as news are the only strength factors of selected online news portals, out of seven criteria of accountability developed on the basis of the Canadian Association of Journalists' Ethical Guidelines (CAJ, 2011) and the Code of Journalistic Ethics for Nepali journalists (PCN, 2008). To uphold the professional and public frames of accountability, there are many areas in which, according to the interview participants, the selected Nepali online news media need to improve. Common shortcomings include using anonymous sources, withholding bylines, relying on secondary sources, correcting errors without acknowledgment, and using photos without proper accreditation.

Semi-structured interviews with ten online journalists identified multiple present-day trends of the selected online news portals in Nepal: (1) journalists lack academic or theoretical knowledge but have a practical understanding of accountability, (2) small-scale online news portals tend to promote partisan interests, (3) traditional gatekeeping mechanisms are losing their significance in Internet-based media, (4) use of secondary sources and unhealthy competition for

news breaks are increasing, (5) public grievances are strategically deterred and discouraged through the hiding of contact information, (6) PCN's resources and efforts are inadequate to monitor news media throughout the country, and (7) the existing code of ethics is insufficient to cover technical issues related to online media such as post deletion, crowdsourcing, and the archiving of disputed news stories. These trends on the digital platforms reviewed for this research, interview participants cautioned, may lead online journalists to compromise their journalistic integrity. This thesis further identifies some of the key challenges for ensuring accountability in online news media in Nepal. First among these challenges is the lack of government and market recognition of online news, resulting from the newness of the medium. By legislation, government agencies do not recognize online media as mainstream news media, and, therefore, do not provide online news media with the welfare fund or other privileges that traditional news media have enjoyed for so long. The availability of large-scale investment and the sustainability of online media are the second challenge, as Internet-based media in Nepal have not yet been able to attract big investment. As a consequence, the market considers online news portals to be alternative media, and often does not advertise its services and products there. Another challenge is that gatekeeping mechanisms are losing their significance because more technocratic people are involved, dependency on secondary sources is growing, and experienced journalists in traditional media are in an experiential learning phase on digital platforms. As approximately three-fourths of the total population of Nepal does not have Internet access, the digital divide can be considered another challenge by itself. In addition, those who have access to the Internet often suffer from slow, ineffective and frequently interrupted service. Hence, audience participation and interactivity are dominated by people living in cities and abroad. Finally, dilemmas in regard to ethical issues created by digital platforms themselves are another

challenge. Study participants believed that traditional media ethics are not enough to address the non-traditional technical features of online media. However, not a single online news portal reviewed for this study has developed a policy addressing online media-related issues such as content moderation, post deletion or collaborative news production.

The interview participants highly valued media accountability to public and professional stakeholders, and also stressed its importance in promoting the social responsibility of media and journalists. The participants, therefore, suggested a number of basic requirements that foster professionalism in the online news media reviewed for this research in the context of a developing country like Nepal. These requirements, which may be applicable to other online news portals in Nepal as well, include large-scale investment and the sustainability of online media, adequate infrastructure (such as a national network of qualified journalists), accessibility of the Internet to a wide populace, and expansion of media literacy. Once these requirements are fulfilled, the need for a strong gatekeeping system, professional/technical knowledge of digital media among online journalists, issues related to transparency and ethics (for example, post-publication correction, post deletion, use of anonymous sources, and crowdsourcing), and effective media accountability mechanisms such as press councils or ombudsmen seem to be the most significant accountability-related issues according to the participants.

By employing the four frames of accountability developed by Clifford Christians (1989), Dennis McQuail (2003) and other scholars, this research finds that the audience frame of accountability is still emphasized theoretically in order to promote social responsibility. Despite this theoretical emphasis, however, the market frame has been practically dominant in the selected online news portals because media sustainability is directly related to market support, and media owners focus more on profit than on journalistic values and accountability. It is found

that a significant number of online news portals in Nepal carry partisan content in hopes of getting financial support and other privileges from political allies. It is also found that, among the four frames of accountability, the professional frame is the least prioritized because it is self-regulatory and does not invite direct financial benefits.

Internet-based media platforms can enhance media accountability due to unique features such as interactivity, transparency (through hyperlinks), accessibility, and "multimediality," argue media scholars (e.g. Lasorsa, Lewis, & Hilton, 2012; Singer, 2005). Therefore, one of the fundamental questions of this research study is whether or not digital platforms have enhanced accountability in Nepal in regard to the professional and public stakeholders. With regard to this question, the majority of interview participants conclude that the online news portals associated with traditional media are performing better than online-only news media in upholding the professional and public frames of accountability. Participant 8 stated:

One can argue that digital platform can increase accountability due to the interactivity feature. That's true. But if the leadership is not strict to the ethical values, online content can be altered because the leadership is the sole controller over there. In this sense, online tends to be less accountable than print media because digital content can be manipulated even after it has been published. (Participant 8, September 5, 2013)

Interview participants argued that qualified human resources, adequate infrastructure, and professionally committed leadership can make any media (traditional or online) accountable to public and to professional stakeholders. Traditional media in general are believed to be more accountable because they have fulfilled the aforementioned requirements, whereas most of the online-only news portals in Nepal have been unable to do so.

Finally, the research findings indicate that a reduction of the digital divide and a rise in media literacy may significantly encourage audiences to actively participate on digital platforms

and watch the watchdogs. In addition, strong and effective monitoring bodies such as press councils or ombudsmen could safeguard audience interests in cases where media houses and journalists ignore them and deviate from the professional track to emphasize political or market interests.

6.2 Significance of the Study

The findings of this research study, which aims to make a reasonable contribution to scholarly inquiry on the accountability of online news portals in Nepal, are important for three reasons. First, their assessment of performance of the selected on line news portals with regard to accountability to professional and public stakeholders in the context of a huge digital divide in Nepal is important because various media scholars (e.g., Babcock, 2012; Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Cenite & Zhang, 2012; Friend & Singer, 2007; Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 2003) stress that audience participation and interactivity are very important to making online media accountable, and the digital divide in Nepal is a major hurdle to such participation. Based on their knowledge and work experience, Interview participants iterated that accountability can be enhanced on digital platforms owing to their non-traditional features, such as interactivity, transparency, global accessibility, and "multimediality". However, these same participants argued that non-traditional features of online media are not enough to ensure accountability on digital platforms in a developing country like Nepal, where the digital divide is a dominant phenomenon. This research study has discovered that Nepal, as a developing country, needs to focus on development in several basic areas related to digital infrastructure (such as widespread accessibility of online media, large-scale investment and sustainability, and monitoring mechanisms for online news media) and education (including media literacy among audiences

and capacity building among journalists) to make online media accountability to professional and public stakeholders a real possibility.

Second, the findings show that the online news portals reviewed for this study have been suffering from a double set of challenges to maintaining professional and public accountability: the infrastructural challenges, and challenges to media accountability created by specific features of online media. The infrastructural challenges include those issues listed above, plus the lack of government recognition of online portals as news media and the absence of a code of ethics to cover technical aspects of online media. The challenges created by online media themselves include, but are not limited to the practices of post-publication correction and post deletion, a lack of professional and/or technical knowledge among online journalists, and the growing insignificance of gatekeeping mechanisms. Though developed countries in Europe and North America have also been suffering from the second type of challenges, Nepal, as a developing country, has been suffering from challenges of both types. This thesis study has found that the challenges created by digital media themselves can be properly addressed only after the basic issues related to digital infrastructure are resolved. Otherwise, these challenges will remain largely as they are in online media, which therefore may be more vulnerable to compromised journalistic integrity and professional values.

Finally, the research findings indicate that the proactive role of the audience is very important to online media accountability, providing substantial pressure on journalists (through feedback and criticism) to maintain accountability to professional and public stakeholders. However, since more than 73 percent of Nepali citizens are unable to access digital media content due to the digital divide, audience monitoring itself is not sufficient to make online media accountable to professional and public stakeholders. Interview participants argued that, in

such a situation, the role of regulatory agencies such as press councils, which can mediate and settle audience concerns related to media institutions, is very important because media tend to ignore audience concerns when the latter's presence is limited. Hence, this research has found that, in countries with a digital divide like Nepal's, press councils – a traditional type of media monitoring body – are still relevant in the Twitter age to compensate for the gap in active audience participation by fostering dialogue and interaction between media institutions (or journalists) and audiences regarding the latter's concerns in relation to online media practices and public accountability, and to address ethical issues of online media, which are currently unaddressed by the existing journalistic code of ethics for Nepali journalists (PCN, 2008).

Furthermore, the findings suggest that a modification to the theoretical frame of media accountability (as mentioned in page 33) would be warranted to clearly analyze the different scenarios of political and legal accountability. The frame synonymously uses "political" and "legal" terms to denote the legislative obligations of media institutions and journalists. Scholars (such as Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Krogh, 2012; McQuail, 2003) state that all public policies, laws and regulations related to media are within the political (or legal) frame, and the implementation of the frame can be coercive, confrontational, and non-negotiable. However, this theoretical frame fails to assume the realities of a developing country like Nepal where legal and political scenarios are significantly different. On the one hand, there are constitutional and legal provisions to regulate news media, which can be equally applied to all media institutions and journalists (IFAMMN, 2012; IMMN, 2008, UNESCO, 2013). On the other hand, there is a strong political hold on media and journalists, such as government controls state-funded media (such as Gorkhapatra, Radio Neapl, Nepal Television, National News Agency), political parties directly or indirectly run media outlets (from print to online) to promote partisan interests, and

most of the journalists and media institutions in Nepal have been polarized into different political groups. As a consequence, these media and journalists can be more accountable to political institutions and promote partisan interests in the hope of getting political opportunities.

Therefore, the media accountability frame can be modified and expanded into five different stakeholders: legal, political, market, professional and public, so that media accountability scenario in a developing country context can be better interpreted.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

This thesis study is limited to journalists in Nepal who are practicing online journalism at present, and to news portals that are among the five most-viewed in the country. From each selected news portal, one reporter and one editor were interviewed, in order to include a range of detailed information and to cross-verify perceptions of accountability among journalists. No other media ethics experts or independent media critics have been included in the research study process because the primary aim of the research is to assess the status of online media in Nepal by interviewing journalists working for the top-viewed online news media in Nepal. The research findings, therefore, cannot be generalized to all developing countries or to all media outlets in Nepal. As the research has employed qualitative methods, similar research using another methodology may yield different findings.

Limitations can also be seen in the interview, one of the data collection methods employed during the research. The interview responses may not reflect actual practices in online news portals: one cannot assess the truth just by questioning the journalists, and verification of interview claims can be difficult, since there is no digital archiving system in many online news portals in Nepal, and updated versions of stories often replace the previous ones without proper

documentation of the changes. Therefore, to overcome this limitation as well as to assess the consistency of journalists on digital platforms with regard to accountability practices, five of the most highlighted news articles from each selected news portal (twenty-five news stories in total) were studied for issues of accountability in advance of the interviews. In addition, the researcher tracked down one news report contributed by each participant who represented a reporting department, in order to assess the consistency of the accountability practices of the journalists in the study. These two different verification methods enhance the validity of the data and the study's analysis of online media accountability.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Assessing the state of accountability in online news media is a broad, dynamic area of research because all traditional news media are gradually shifting to online platforms, and because online-only media have been increasing their quantitative and qualitative presence in digital space. There has been widespread optimism that digital platforms are more audience-friendly due to unique features that encourage participatory, accountable journalism. At the same time, various technical, professional and ethical issues have appeared which tend to increase the vulnerability of online media in terms of upholding journalistic accountability to professional and public stakeholders. This thesis has aimed to make a reasonable contribution to scholarly inquiry on online media accountability in Nepal, a developing country suffering from the digital divide.

However, a number of areas related to this research topic may require further inquiry. For instance, interview participants for this research argued that a reduction of the digital divide could increase audience participation in online media in Nepal, which is very important to

making media accountable to their professional and public stakeholders. Pippa Norris (2001) warns that having a basic level of digital accessibility is not the end of the digital divide. According to Norris, *knowledge and skills*, and *quality and competence* to use the Internet and utilize media content are very important indicators of the digital accessibility gap. Approximately one-fourth of the Nepali population has access to Internet service, but no research has been found that assesses the *knowledge and skills* or the *quality and competence* of the Internet-accessible audience. Further research may be necessary to assess the level of knowledge and competence of those audiences with digital access.

On a similar front, assuming that media investment from entrepreneurs unfamiliar with press freedom and responsibility can diminish journalistic values and media accountability to the public, some of the participants of this research recommended the development of media literacy among media entrepreneurs as compulsory prior to investing in the media sector. This assumption needs further research in order to be established as a benchmark of media accountability.

The findings of this thesis on the state of online journalism in Nepal with regard to accountability show that a lack of government and market recognition, the digital divide, problems of investment and sustainability, and inadequate ethical standards are the major challenges to media accountability with regard to professional and public stakeholders. In addition, it is also found that unless the digital divide is reduced and audience interactivity is increased, the presence of digital platforms may not actually contribute to increased media accountability. Further investigation is required to generalize whether or not other developing countries are facing similar challenges.

Finally, a literature review of scholarly articles for this study shows that digital platforms have diminished the role of traditional media accountability instruments such as press councils. However, the research findings suggest that these intermediary institutions are still relevant in handling audience grievances when they are ignored by media institutions or the journalists therein. Therefore, the effectiveness of press councils in the context of increased audience participation on digital platforms needs an empirical investigation to determine whether or not the current effectiveness of press councils is due to the digital divide in Nepal.

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Appendix 1: **Semi-structured interview questions**

Warm-up question

1. How long have you worked in your position?
 - What is your exact title?
 - What are your primary responsibilities?

Conceptual understanding of accountability

2. Define media accountability?
3. Who are the key stakeholders to whom media should be accountable? Why?
 - In general, how should news media organizations respond to accountability issues?
 - Can you share a relevant personal or organizational experience with me?
4. What are the characteristics or present day trends of media [from conventional to new media] ethics in Nepal?
 - For example, best practices that help to strengthen media accountability
 - Or, other practices that need improvements to ensure professionalism
 - How do traditional media (such as newspapers, radio and television) implement media accountability in your organization?
 - What are the recent trends of online news media?

Status of accountability:

5. What do you think about ethical practices of online media in order to ensure media accountability?
 - Are they better or worse than their traditional counterparts like newspapers, radio and television? In what way?
6. Many media scholars argue that digital platforms have enhanced accountability in online journalism. Do you agree?
 - How can you justify this?

Challenges on accountability

7. Based on your work experience with your media organization, what are the present day challenges of online media to ensure they are more accountable to the public?

Role of audience

8. Four stakeholders of media accountability exist in academic literature which includes authority, market, professionalism and audience. Where do you think the focus lies in the Nepali online news media is the major focus of Nepali online news media in general? Why?
 - How do you rate their accountability response to professionalism and audience?
 - Do you think the audience has a role in making media more accountable?
 - What type of role?

Digital divide and media literacy

9. In your knowledge and experience, what are the factors that can help make media more accountable in the context of Nepal? How?
 - Do you think the digital divide contributes in making media (particularly online news media) less accountable? How?
 - What about media literacy? Can that influence to make media less accountable?

Appendix 2:
Document review of twenty-five news stories
(Compared and verified with two different sources)

News	Headlines	Given information is truthful and reliable	Source is quoted and clearly mentioned	Platform provided for audience's feedback	Advertisements are not presented as news	Errors are corrected and acknowledged	News stories are archived for future reference	Photos are credited and not altered.
1	Deuba faction dominates Trade Union election	Yes,	Yes, (but no direct quote) Byline: M. Dhital	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used
2	Let's unite with UCPN-M: Central Member of Baidya faction	N/A, (interview-based news)	Yes, No byline	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo used, not credited
3	33- political alliance announces strike on CA candidacy registration day	Yes,	No, (just a narrative report) No byline	No comment	Yes	No, Sub-headline and news modified & extended without acknowledgement	Yes	Photo not used
4	Nepali team announced for SAF Championship	Yes,	Yes, (no direct quote), No byline,	No comment	Yes	No, News fully changed without credit	Yes, (location changed)	Photo added later
5	CIAA's warns Dept of Foreign Employment for returning aspirant foreign employees from airport	Yes, (press release based information)	Yes, (no direct quote), No byline,	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes, (location changed)	Photo not used
6	33 political party alliance seeking President's intervention	Yes,	No, (just a narrative report), Byline: BK Basnet	1 comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used
7	Gold price soars	Yes,	7. Yes, Byline: RSS News	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo used but not credited
8	Dahal wins Trade Union's Chair	Yes,	No, (just a narrative report),	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used

			Byline: Binod Tripathi					
9	Manage Human Resource Immediately in TIA: CIAA	Yes	Yes, press released based information, Byline: Kantipur Reporter	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used
10	Adhikari couple transferred to ICU	Yes	Yes, No byline,	1 comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo used but not credited
11	CIAA warns Airport Authority for harassing abroad goers	No, (press release based news, presented as their own story)	Yes, No byline	6 comments	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used
12	33 political party alliance seeks President's intervention	Yes,	Yes, Byline: P. Timilsina	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes, (location changed) (No links provided for updated story)	Photo not used
13	Deuba faction's Dahal wins Trade Union Congress election	No, (1 factual error, & wrong dateline)	No, (just a narrative report), Byline: BK Adhikari	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used
14	Gorkhaland movement makes Pashupatinagar market shut	Yes,	Yes, Byline: B. R. Bhattarai	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used
15	Discussion to involve disappointed political parties in election	Yes,	Yes, No byline,	1 comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used
16	We are sad despite having everything; they are happy without anything	N/A, (Interview-based feature; no other source found to compare)	Yes, No byline	14 comments	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	4 photos used, but not credited
17	94 aged poet to heighten enthusiasm	Yes,	Yes, Byline: Setopati reporter	4 comments	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes, (No links provided for similar story)	1 photo used but not credited

18	Lord Krishna's Birthday celebration	Yes,	No, (just a narrative report), Byline: P. Lama	1 comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo credit: P. Lama
19	Three-day Climate Conference commenced; 120 delegates of 13 nations participating	Yes,	Yes, (no direct quote), Byline: S. Timilsina	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	1 photo used, no credit
20	Cricket journey from Dhangadhi to Kathmandu	Yes,	Yes, Byline: Y. Rawal	1 comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	1 photo used but not credited
21	Bhuwan KC and Ram Kumari Jhakri would-be-candidates of CPN-UML	Yes,	Yes, (no direct quote) No byline	1 comment	Yes	No, Content slightly altered in headline and in the body text	Yes	No photos used
22	33-party alliance announces protest program against CA election	Yes,	Yes, (no direct quote) No byline	3 comments	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used
23	Illegal activity in the name of Lord Krishna	N/A, (Feature story, no other source found to compare)	Yes, Byline: M. Timilsina	1 comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	2 photos, credited
24	CIAA warns DOI for harassing emigrants	No, (press release based news, presented as their own story)	No, (press release based news presented as their own) No byline	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes, (but no links to related stories)	No photos used
25	Aunt throws nephew in pond alive	N/A, (Filler news, no other source found to compare.)	Yes, (no direct quote) No byline	No comment	Yes	N/A, Same story archived	Yes	Photo not used

**Appendix 3:
Details of Interview Participants**

Alexa Rank*	Name of news portal	Interview participant #	Participant's job title	Interview date	Language of Interview	Sex
1	Onlinekhabar.com	1	Executive editor	September 4, 2013	Nepali	Male
		2	Senior reporter	September 8, 2013	Nepali	Male
2	eKantipur.com	3	News coordinator	September 2, 2013	Nepali	Male
		4	Senior reporter	September 7, 2013	Nepali	Male
3	Nagariknews.com	5	Online news chief	September 2, 2013	Nepali	Male
		6	Senior correspondent	August 31, 2013	Nepali	Male
4	Setopati.com	7	Senior reporter	September 1, 2013	Nepali	Female
		8	Editor-in-Chief	September 5, 2013	English	Male
5	Ujyaloonline.com	9	Editor	August 26, 2013	Nepali	Male
		10	Senior correspondent	September 3, 2013	Nepali	Male

**The most viewed online news portals of Nepal were identified on August 16, 2013 based on Alexa ranking.*

Appendix 4: Ethics Approval Certificate

File Number: 06-13-02

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 08/06/2013



Université d'Ottawa University of Ottawa
 Service de subventions de recherche et déontologie Research Grants and Ethics Services

Ethics Approval Notice Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Geneviève	Bonin	Arts / Communication	Supervisor
Bhanu	Bhakta Acharya	Arts / Communication	Student Researcher

File Number: 06-13-02**Type of Project:** Master's Thesis**Title:** A case study of the status of accountability in online news media in Nepal

Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Approval Type
08/06/2013	08/05/2014	Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

Special Conditions / Comments:
N/A

File Number: 06-13-02

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 08/06/2013



Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
Service de subventions de recherche et déontologie Research Grants and Ethics Services

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove subjects from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at:

<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>.

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at:

<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: ethics@uOttawa.ca.

Signature:

Riana Marcotte
Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research
For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

**Appendix 5:
Invitation Letter to Participants**

Date:

[Name of participant]
[Designation, Organization]

Dear X,

You are invited to participate in a research conducted by Bhanu Bhakta Acharya, under the supervision of Assistant Professor Genevieve Bonin, Ph.D. at the University of Ottawa. The purpose of this research is to assess the status of media accountability on online news portals in Nepal. The research will be conducted using three different methods: semi-structured interviews, content analysis and website observation.

You will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview that will take approximately 30-40 minutes. The questions are focused on general concept of media accountability, its status and challenges in the context of Nepal, role of audience to make media accountable, and impact of digital divide. Following this session, participants will be provided a transcript of their interview and asked to review it and provide additional comments or feedback, if any. The data provided will be kept confidential and anonymous as per the conditions stated in the formal consent form.

Your participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of the status of accountability of online news media in Nepal by providing a firsthand account on how reporters and editors of online news portals in Nepal deal with accountability issues.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to the information you provide.

I hope to hear from you by X date if you wish to participate. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor directly.

Thank you,

Researcher: Bhanu Bhakta Acharya
Department of Communication/ University of Ottawa
E-mail:
Phone:

Supervisor: Asst. Prof. Genevieve Bonin, Ph.D.
Department of Communication/ University of Ottawa
Telephone:
Email:

Appendix 6:**Consent Form**

A case study of the status of accountability in online news media in Nepal

Researcher: Bhanu Bhakta Acharya

Department of Communication

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

University of Ottawa

Telephone:

Email:

Supervisor: Asst. Prof. Genevieve Bonin, Ph.D.

Department of Communication

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

University of Ottawa

Telephone:

Email:

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the aforementioned research study conducted by Bhanu Bhakta Acharya under the supervision of Prof. Genevieve Bonin, Ph.D.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to assess the status of accountability in online news media in Nepal by interviewing online journalists (10 editors and 5 reporters) representing the top five most viewed online news portals in Nepal, by analyzing the content of the twenty-five most popular news stories from the selected news portals, and by observing the websites during the research period.

Participation: My participation will consist in attending one interview session for approximately 30-40 minutes during which I will be asked questions by the researcher about my experiences in online journalism focusing on media accountability issues. The interviews have been scheduled for _____ (place), _____ (date), _____ (time). I will also be asked to review the transcript of the interview for accuracy and additional feedback once the interview is transcribed, which should take approximately 10-15 minutes.

Risks: I understand that my participation in this study should entail minimal risks, since the information I will disclose is voluntary. However, I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize any possible risks by keeping my participation in this research confidential and anonymous.

Benefits: My participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding on the status of accountability in online news media in Nepal by identifying challenges and strengths. Since there are very few researches done in Nepal on the topic of media accountability, the research study on online media may encourage citizen journalists to making media accountable to its audiences.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the creation of a thesis (CMN 6999) for graduate level study. I am assured that my confidentiality will be protected by the fact that only the researcher and his supervisor will have access to the data. Anonymity will be protected by removing any identifying characteristics from the data during the analysis and reporting stages.

Conservation of Data: The data collected, including audio recordings of interviews, electronic and print versions of transcripts, and electronic and print notes will be kept by the researcher in a secure manner using a password protected computer. The electronic data will be stored on a USB drive and both the drive as well as the printed materials will be kept in the supervisor's locked office and storage space. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to the data and it will be conserved for five year.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be deleted and/or destroyed.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Bhanu Bhakta Acharya of the Department of Communication, Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, which is under the supervision of Prof. Genevieve Bonin, Ph.D.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 159, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5.

Tel.: (613) 562-5841

Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date: